

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

First Reading Genesis 2: 18–24

The Bible begins with the Pentateuch (Greek for five books), of which Genesis is the first. The first eleven chapters are set in the time before recorded human history, while the remaining chapters of Genesis, 12–50, are set in historical times familiar from ancient records. These opening chapters deal with the beginnings of humanity long before Israel's time. They are regarded as a series of traditional stories, many of which take the form of myths describing the pattern of human behaviour. They are often referred to as 'primeval history'.

Today we read the second account of God's creation. The first was told in the first chapter of Genesis. They are two different, but complementary, stories.

In seeking to alleviate the loneliness of the first created human being, God

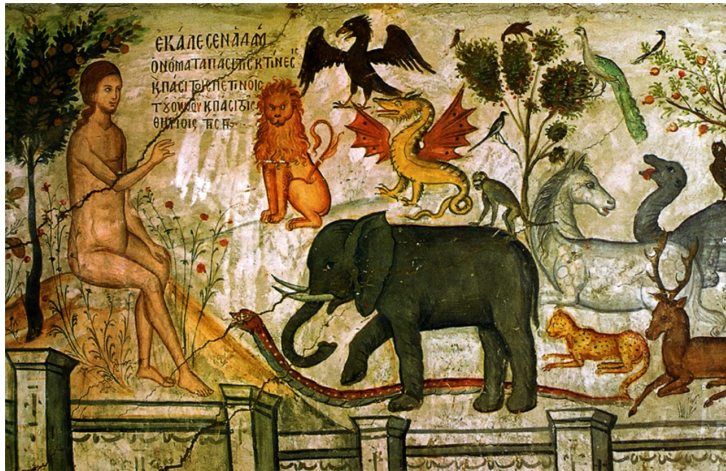
creates animals which the man is invited to name. In doing so, it could be said that Adam becomes a co-creator with God, since naming a person or animal is a way of defining and shaping them.

The notion of a 'helpmate' in the Old Testament does not imply subordination, but on the contrary someone equal or even superior to the one they help. God is often called a 'helper' to humans (Psalm 10: 14).

The man's response to discovering his helpmate, the woman, is the first lyrical poetry in the Bible. Many more examples will follow, particularly in the Song of Songs.

Praying this passage before today's Gospel on divorce will help to remind us of God's original intention in creating man and woman: that there should be a deep bond between the two people, so they are not alone.

Adam naming the animals (15th-c Greek icon)



Gospel Mark 10: 2–16

'Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?'

Jesus, having left Galilee, is making his way south to Jerusalem. As he arrives in Judea, he is met by crowds of people and he begins to teach them. Some of the Pharisees there take this opportunity to question Jesus on the emotive subject of divorce.

The Jewish law of divorce

This goes back to Deuteronomy 24: 1. At that time the law was very simple: a man could easily divorce his wife, and she would then be free to marry again. The divorce bill became more complicated over time, but the process was still very easy and always at the discretion of the man. The problem was the interpretation of the reason for the divorce: the only condition was that the man should find 'something objectionable' about his wife.

Different interpretations

There were two schools of thought about this. The House of Shammai (which took its name from the first-century Jewish sage Shammai) held that a man could only divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery; while the House of Hillel (following Shammai's contemporary Hillel) interpreted 'something objectionable' much more widely. This meant that even the smallest fault in the husband's eyes could constitute grounds for divorce. This Hillel version was the one that prevailed. Consequently, in Jesus's time women were reluctant to marry, and when Jesus speaks on the subject, he is restoring stability to marriage.

'What did Moses command you?'

Jesus quotes Mosaic law, but also adds that this law was written because the people at that time 'were so unteachable'. The fact that the law was laid down in a particular situation also meant it was not permanently binding. Jesus gives authority to his opinion that marriage should be permanent by going further than Deuteronomy and quoting from the Creation story in Genesis 1: 27 and 2: 24 (see First Reading: Gen. 2: 18–24).

Jesus has previously spoken about marriage and re-marriage in teaching on the fulfilment of the Law (Matthew 5: 31–2), so the people knew what his answer would certainly be. Herod had divorced his wife and re-married, and the Pharisees may have wished to provoke his hostility towards Jesus.

'Let the little children come to me.'

Jewish mothers liked to bring their children to be blessed by a distinguished Rabbi, especially on the child's first birthday.