

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018
Fr Jonathan Jong

Readings

Joshua 24.1-2, 15-18

Ephesians 5.21-32

John 6.60-69

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

There is a lot of Scripture left out of the Sunday lectionary. According to a Jesuit whose website I recently discovered¹, it includes 61.9% of the epistle to the Ephesians, which is to say that any bit of Ephesians is more likely to appear than not. 61.9% is a larger proportion than any other book of the Bible. For example, we only hear 31.5% of Galatians, which is nearly as long. That's the letter in which St Paul tells us that, in Christ, there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free.

Among that 61.9% of Ephesians, we get this passage about wives and husbands. Conspicuously missing from the Sunday lectionary are the passages that

¹ <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm>

directly follow. To be told that children should obey their parents and that slaves should obey their earthly masters, you will need to come to a weekday mass, on the Wednesday of the 30th week of Ordinary Time, once every other year. This, they hide under a bushel; but our pericope about marital arrangements evidently deserves a spotlight.

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Here's the problem. Ephesians 5 is regularly used to justify domestic violence. Not in theory, but in reality, real as black eyes and cracked bones. Not a long time ago, but *still, now*. Allusions to this and similar passages in 1 Timothy, 1 Peter, and elsewhere can often be found in reports about abusive relationships. One woman's submission to the 2016 Australian Royal Commission into Family Violence begins, quote, "I was manipulated to stay within my marriage by five different ministers & respective congregations", and continues, "I was told...to be obedient so [my husband] wouldn't have to hit me". This story is not atypical.

Of course, we can say that abuse is justified only by *distorted* readings of these texts, and *misapplications* of theologies of "male headship" that, by the way, are taught in churches in our own communion, even in our

own city. Now, those who defend the text are neither illiterate nor stupid. In their attempt to save Scripture, they make some clever points. It's almost feminist, they say, given the historical context, to make demands on the husband as well as the wife. And indeed the wife's *submission* here does come with the arguably more onerous injunction for husbands to love their wives, even as he loves his own body, even as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. Furthermore, given the theology of marriage suggested in Ephesians, the submission and love in question are no longer between two individuals, but within one marriage, in which wife and husband are, as it were, parts of each other, joined as heads to bodies, one flesh. A wife who submits to her husband, is just submitting to a part of herself, really. Maybe.

It *could* work, I guess: different does not to have to entail unequal: submission could have its own dignity, no less than love does. It could work; but it doesn't. It works no better than the idea that ecclesiastical hierarchies—between bishops, priests, and the laity—imply *order* rather than asymmetries of power in the old-fashioned, which is to say satanic, sense: the evidence that this is just a bit of cynical wordplay that

permits men to retain dark power in the Church is plainly on display, all over the news right now.

The people who defend this text are not illiterate or stupid, but they are *wrong*. They are wrong to treat it differently than they do the passages about slavery; they are wrong to behave as if its virtues, such as they are, outweigh the great damage they can and do wreak on women around the world. And the people who put together the Roman lectionary—which we use here, pious anglo-catholics that we are—are wrong to put this text next to, of all texts, this passage from St John’s gospel, which just happens to be one of my favourite passages of all of Scripture, to which I often turn in times of doubt and struggle. It begins with disciples observing that “This is a hard saying” and ends with the Twelve saying, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”.

Whether by accident or as cruel joke or with sinister intent to silence dissent, the Church has paired together a source text of great suffering with one of great solace. *This is a hard saying*, we are forced to hear, with no context about what “this” refers to, except that we have also just heard that women should

be subject to their husbands, as the Church is to Christ.

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So, here's the context. There is a lot that happens in the sixth chapter of John's gospel, most of which involves bread. First, Jesus feeds the five thousand. Then, he tries to convince the crowd that the bread that fills their tummies is nothing in comparison to the bread of life, which is himself. What's more, it's his flesh and blood that we are to eat, if we are to enjoy eternal life. This is the saying that the crowd finds hard: this increasingly cannibalistic talk by the itinerant miracle worker. God only knows what he would say or do next if they stayed.

What happens ultimately, of course, is that Jesus subjects himself to betrayal and abandonment, interrogation and torture, humiliation and death. He submits his own body to be broken and his blood to be spilt. And whenever two or three are gathered in his name, he offers himself to us from his one perfect sacrifice, so that we too can offer ourselves, can submit our bodies for the sake of the gospel, can be subject to

the world's needs, which we are called to serve and love.

It is a hard saying, not least because if the *master* gives himself up for us, God only knows what will be expected of us. And we do too: because the body follows where the head leads, as the epistle tells us, and we know where Christ has gone, to which the Scriptures bear overwhelming witness. The Bible could not be more clear about what it means to follow Jesus, our head. We are told over and over again. Told to take up his cross. Told that we are baptised into his death. Told that to be with him is to drink from his cup. Told that there is no love greater than to lay down one's life for one's friend.

This is why it makes no sense to tell wives to submit to their husbands, and not also vice versa; or rather, it makes no sense to draw a hard distinction between the wife's submission and the husband's love. The epistle to the Ephesians gets it right in the first line, before it goes off the rails to perpetuate patriarchal familial arrangements for no good reason: *be subject to one another*. And St John gets it right, later in the fifteenth chapter and elsewhere: *love one another as I have loved you*, which is to say, if and when it comes to

it, and well it might, lay yourselves down, even your life, but certainly your pride and anger, insecurity and shame, these things that get in the way of the enjoyment of each others' company.

These are, when it comes down to it, the same command: that hard calling to put others before ourselves. It is a calling for all of us, married or otherwise. Marriage is the sacrament in which those of us who need it get to practice putting others first, with just one other person. I would be very surprised if husbands need the practice less than wives do.

To be sure, there *is* dignity in submission and obedience: but not if they reinforce power imbalances that inevitably, on this side of glory, lead to corruption. It is the dignity of imitating Christ, who loves us and submits himself to us, who is obedient to his Father's will. Christ, who is himself the image of God whose own life is constituted by mutual self-emptying, the making room for one another by Father, Son, and Spirit. Wives are called to imitate Christ thusly, and husbands also, and you, and me too.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.