

I think we might agree that today's gospel is relevant to us for a number of reasons: the hope of all marriages, the reality of divorce that has gashed many families, and the innocence and beauty of children.

Jesus says *let the children come to me*. He does so because they are our example of approaching God. They do not sugar coat anything, as they see things as they are with no excuses.

+I remember being home from seminary, staying with mom and dad. They were babysitting one of my nieces while having some construction work done to the home. One of the workers came to the door, ringing the doorbell.

He came in shorts with no tee shirt. Upon seeing him, my niece said with the greatest of innocence, "Great day grana, look how big his belly is." My mom was horrified, but the man responded, "It took a great many beers to build this."

We are to accept the kingdom of God like children, because young children are totally dependent on adults and necessarily receive everything as a gift. As a society and certainly as a church, we have lost our innocence, our sense of childlike wonder at the value of human life.

In Jesus' day, a child had no legal rights; a child was powerless, poor, totally dependent, even dispensable. That child in today's gospel is a symbol of all people who are marginally on the fringe of our society, people who are considered dispensable, people who are poor and powerless, people judged to be of no use to society—the elderly, the ill, those in prison, even the unborn.

When our sense of childlike wonder of life begins to die, then our sense of prayer and worship, and then our sense of respect for all human life will begin to die. On Respect Life Sunday, we celebrate the sacredness of all human life. We proclaim that all life is a precious gift from God.

+I remember a friend of mine, who has a child with Downs Syndrome, said of his son, "It is like having a child with one foot on earth and one foot in heaven."

Every time I celebrate Mass at the VA Home I'm reminded how all life is to be cherished in whatever state we might find someone. It is a very vibrant and happy community.

It is the halting steps of the elderly that remind us that we too will grow old and hope to be respected.

It is the criminal languishing in our prisons who calls us to reflect on the mercy of God and God's *willingness* to forgive the sins of the most hardened and callous among us.

It is the poor in our midst who remind us that charity is not sharing from the excesses of our material possessions, but that true Christian charity is giving from our scarcity and our need.

These are the gifts of life we must treasure, value, protect, and celebrate. And if we are to celebrate, then we must first pray—pray to God who is the creator and sustainer of all life. We must pray to see in the gift of a child an answer to the cynicism and despair we find in the world.

We must pray for those who, in the difficult circumstances of their personal lives, cannot find the strength to sustain the new life they have created. And we must pray for our own sins of omission in failing to support or share their burdens.

On this day, we must pray in a special way for those who use their medical skills and healing gifts for the destruction of human life, rather than for its preservation and enhancement.

In Jesus' day, like children, women had very few rights. He said that because of the *hardness* of their hearts Moses wrote a bill of divorce. Prior to Moses, a Jewish woman who was abandoned by her husband, could survive in the society only by attaching herself to another man.

Thus, she would be committing adultery, and a Jewish woman who committed adultery was liable to be stoned to death! And so, to protect the woman from being stoned simply because her husband had ditched her, Moses had invented the writ of dismissal. That way she could be free to remarry. Unfortunately, she could be divorced for any reason, like being a lousy cook.

In this context Jesus's prohibition of divorce went against the cultural and religious grain. His radical teaching encouraged the husband to regard his wife not as a possession but rather as a partner. Jesus gave protection and security to the woman lest she be sent away on the husband's whim.

Sometimes we so focus on the painful and sensitive aspects of divorce that we ignore the positive ideal of marriage set forth in Mark 10. The positive ideal is that in marriage the union between a man and a woman is so close that they can and do really become "*one flesh*"

We are made in the image of God. But how? Well, we are told that "God is love." When a couple loves one another, we then see the image of God and how we are made in that image. God is eternal, which means so too love. It can constantly expand *outward*.

When you see an elderly couple holding hands, we see this. I see that in my parents, who have been married over 60 years. They see each other as beautiful as when they were first married. They show us the enduring love of God has for each of us. That is the beauty of two becoming *one flesh*.

+A 65-year-old railway man who fell into a coma following in an accident in communist Poland regained consciousness 19 years later to find democracy and a market economy.

Wheelchair-bound Jan Grzebski, whom doctors had given only two or three years to live following his 1988 accident, credited his caring wife Gertruda with his revival. "For 19 years his wife did the job of an experienced intensive care team, changing her comatose husband's position every hour to prevent bed-sore infections," said a physician.

Jan said, "When I went into a coma there was only tea and vinegar in the shops, meat was rationed and huge lines waiting to get gas were everywhere," describing his recollections of the communist system's economic collapse.

"Now I see people on the streets with cell phones and there are so many goods in the shops it makes my head spin." Grzebski awoke to find his four children had all married and produced 11 grandchildren during his years in hospital.

Love kept him alive. And that is why all life is to be loved and cherished.