7 October 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 2: 18–24, Hebrews 1: 1–4, 2: 5–12, Mark 10: 2–16

The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

'No Man is an Island'

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne’s famous poem could easily be used as a prelude to a talk about Brexit. Tempted as I am I’m not going in that direction today. I want to talk about men and women and what it means to be human; about loneliness, togetherness, sex and marriage.

The first chapters of Genesis are probably the most well known in the whole bible. ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,’ The six days of creation and the first sabbath or day of rest are recounted in Chapter 1. In the course of that we read:

So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.

The passage makes clear that humanity together is what matters. All human beings, male and female, are created in the image of God. That is the fundamental truth about our existence. Every human being, of whatever gender, race, creed or age is made in the image
of God. These cathedral walls have seen generations come and go for almost a thousand years. You and me, here today and gone tomorrow, find our true meaning, our true identity in God alone. In God alone we live and move and have our being.

Chapter 2 of Genesis seems to tell a different story. It’s more physical, literally more earthy, as God forms man from the dust of the earth, breathing into him the divine spirit that alone gives life in all its fullness. God sees that it is ‘not good for man to be alone’, and so he is given plants and animals and finally a woman to be his companion. Generations have seen Adam as the first man, with the woman clearly secondary, as she is formed from Adam’s rib. She’s there to support the real deal, the man. ‘It’s a man’s world’ as my grandmother used to say, ruefully. And this is a key bible story that seems to support that.

But look more closely. The Hebrew word Hadam can mean a male human, but can also mean humanity as a whole, as in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2 Hadam is used until the operation when Hadam is separated into Ish, man, and Ishshah, woman. The distinction in the text is clearly made. The unsexed human, of you like, is made male and female. English translations talk of God removing a rib from Adam. But the Hebrew word is more like a ‘part’ or even a ‘side.’ Hadam is separated into two parts, the Hebrew seems to be saying, Ish and Ishshah. Spouses sometimes talk of their partner as ‘their other half’, and bereaved people often speak of feeling torn in two, or missing a whole part of themselves.

In today’s passage, as he sees the woman for the first time, the man expresses his delight, ‘Here at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.’ They are made for each other, and find their destiny together.

‘Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.’

There is a beautiful sexual intimacy in this picture of Paradise before the Fall, ‘And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.’

They can stand openly before each other and before God, with nothing to cover up, nothing to hide. They were ‘naked and unashamed’ we read, made to enjoy each other, and together to enjoy forever the God in whose image both are made. But that is paradise, and now is now. In our fallen world we have love, but we also have hate. We have desire but we also have rape. We have longing but we also have envy, violence, murder. This is the context into which people come and test Jesus in today’s Gospel,
‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ they ask. Simple question, but with people involved, as we all know, never that simple. The law at the time allowed a man to dismiss his wife, though women could not dismiss their husbands. This could lead to abuse of course. In Jesus’ time King Herod desired his brother Philip’s wife for his own, and had taken her from him, so the question put to Jesus has a political context. There is nothing new under the sun when it comes to sex and desire and gender politics going all wrong.

In private, Jesus makes clear to the disciples that what Herod had done was wrong. To break up a marriage and a family because someone more exciting has come along… how can that be right? But in public Jesus takes people back to first principles, back to Genesis 1 and 2. To that big beautiful picture.

‘God made humanity male and female. A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ To make love, in all meanings of that phrase, to make love in a lifelong committed relationship is what we are made for. To express in our human lives, the irrepressible love of God for his people, and to live our lives in that great love.

We’re not in Paradise of course. Genesis goes on to talk of the Fall, and none of us are perfect in our faltering attempts to love and be loved. There will be loneliness and frustration at times, even in the most loving of marriages. But love is patient, love is kind. And ultimately God is Love, God is infinitely patient with us; God is infinitely kind. Even in the best of marriages, the closest of relationships there will be some sense of aloneness, there will be restlessness. Because God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him.

Whatever the state of our human relationships we are never truly alone. God does not falter or fail in seeking us out, in drawing us to his side.

In marriage we don’t promise to be successful. We do promise to be faithful. We do that because God is faithful and we are formed in his image.

So, no woman, or man is an island, entire of itself.

We are made for each other, and we are made for God.

For in the words of the old African proverb,

Without you, I cannot be me.