

Homily: Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Heb 2:9-11)

In the readings this morning, we hear a number of what might be called “foundational” texts – passages from scripture that form the basis of the Church’s teachings on significant issues in its life and in the life of the world. Thus when we hear from the book of Genesis about the creation of Eve, we hear not only the story by which ancient Israel understood how men and women came to be, but in the account of how woman is “the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” we find the basis of the Church’s firm belief in the equal dignity of men and women, who all come from the same source and who are fashioned by the same God. And likewise when we hear of Jesus speaking about marriage in Mark’s Gospel – about a man and woman becoming one flesh and “what God has joined together, no human being must separate” – we can point to the source of the Church’s teaching on the great spiritual worth of married life and the ideal of its permanence. These then are truly foundational texts . . .

They are *not*, however, the texts I wish to speak about today. Instead, I would like to turn to what might be thought of as the foundation of these foundational texts: what we heard between Genesis and the Gospel – the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter is a great long tract of high theology, describing who Jesus Christ is for us and how he has brought about salvation, but its core is summed up in the line we heard this morning: “**he is not ashamed to call them ‘brothers and sisters’**”. The “he”, of course, is Jesus, and the “them” whom he is calling brother and sister are us, the Church. What the author of the letter wants to make clear is that the God who made us, and who saved us, is the same God who comes to us in the person of Jesus, a human being like us in all

things save sin. God is one who enters into our lives, who knows from the inside as it were what it is to be human, who looks upon us not as strangers but as Jesus does when he tells his disciples: “I call you now friends.” In short, we have a God who **is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters**.

It is in this way that I think of this reading as a foundation for those foundational texts we heard. The Church affirms the equal dignity of men and women in part because of insights such as that of Genesis, but ultimately because *Christ* affirms the equal dignity of men and women in calling us his brothers and sisters. And the Church affirms the worth and permanence of marriage because of the words of Jesus in the Gospel, but ultimately because the commitment and union of lives that lies at the heart of a marriage is a reflection of the commitment and union *Christ* has made with us – and which he desires to deepen with us. **“He is not ashamed to call us ‘brothers and sisters’”**. That is what the Church’s teachings on the value of human rights, social justice and marriage rest upon, and that is what – I believe – our Christian lives rest upon and what gives them inspiration.

For if you believe . . . if you hold as true, that God has become one of us, and calls us brother and sister and friend, how can that *not* shape what you do and how you do it, the way you see the world and your place in it . . . who you love and how you love them? It certainly did for Jesus. It concerns matters of great moment – and matters of little moment, which – let’s face it – are the things which make up most of the stories of our lives. So, when this country debates how its enemies captured in the far corners of the world are to be treated and which rights are to be afforded them, shouldn’t the fact that Christ calls those men [and to be inclusive, I’ll say women] brothers and sisters

shape in some way the position we take on the detention of enemy combatants? And when a gubernatorial candidate declares that one of the planks of her platform is the reinstatement of the death penalty in Massachusetts, shouldn't the fact that Christ calls victim *and* criminal *and* executioner "friend" shape in some way the position we take on capital punishment? I do not offer you any answers here . . . the issues are complex, and it is for *you* to inform yourselves and come to a Christ-like decision. But if one comes to a decision without recognizing how God shares in all that is truly human, how God **calls each one of us brother or sister**, then I think that person has forgotten something essential about what it means to be Christian.

But it is not just in the great events of the world that this holds true – not if we wish to live our lives more and more in keeping with the Gospel. Most of our lives, I would suspect, are about the comings and goings of family and friends, co-workers and those we share but a moment in our day with – and not with prisoners at Guantanamo Bay or on death row (. . . though maybe there are some here who have served in those places). For most of us, making real our faith in the God, who calls us brother or sister, means treating those we meet with respect – even with reverence. We generally know the people we're supposed to love – do we treat them with respect? We know the people we're supposed to be good to – do we see in them people worthy to be loved? The call of Christian life is not so much to do monumental things with our lives, but to do loving things with our lives. That is, after all, what Christ does when **he calls us "friend."**

There is a flip side to all that I have just said, and for some it's far harder to hear than the call to value others as God does. In fact it's so hard – and I know this is true for myself – that most people dare do it only in little increments, if at all. And it is

this: if Christ looks at the person sitting to the left and to the right of you as worthy of his love, and if he calls *them* brother and sister, then that means he looks at *you* – and at me – and he sees the same thing. Christ looks at you, and he sees something of himself, something of who he is, *someone* worthy of being a friend – and **he calls you brother,** and **he calls you sister.** If we can live in the light of that, in matters of great moment just as in everyday matters, then we have come a long way – I believe – into entering the Kingdom of God.

My friends, we turn shortly to the Eucharistic table, that great Sacrament of God's presence with us, and we give thanks for the gift God continues to give to us in Christ. Let us do so this morning especially mindful that as we enter into this prayer, we encounter Christ yet again and we take our place as brothers and sisters in a single family of faith – brothers and sisters of Christ; brothers and sisters to one another.