

THE EMMAUS SERIES

8th Sunday Year B

Hosea 2:16-17, 21-22

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Mark 2:18-22

The bridegroom's attendants do not fast while the bridegroom is still with them

As we have seen, the 'conflict stories' of the gospel tradition reflect the early Church's defence against the criticism of those who brought about the death of Jesus. Appealing to pronouncements made by Jesus in his disputes with his critics, they give us an insight into the faith life of the early Christian communities – in this case, possibly the Roman Church in which Peter gave his witness. The central issue in all these confrontations is the refusal of those who saw themselves as the custodians of the nation's faith to accept the prophetic claim of Jesus, that he was inaugurating the era of God's final blessings. This issue comes out with dramatic clarity in the response of Jesus on this occasion.

Though the Law only enjoined fasting on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, the Pharisees observed additional fast days (as Jesus indicates in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Lk 18:12), and it seems that John the Baptist and his followers had adopted this practice. It is not surprising that Jesus and his disciples were asked to explain their disregard of this custom. In his reply, Jesus clearly implies that the order of promise is coming to an end; those who have accepted the message of the coming of God's Kingdom should be celebrating. Indeed, in a momentous declaration he laid claim to being the messianic 'bridegroom' at the centre of these celebrations. For the faith of old Israel, God alone was the bridegroom of the covenanted people. This astounding and moving tradition – associated especially with the name of Hosea – finds moving expression in today's first reading, as the Lord calls the people that have proved unfaithful to a renewed love and intimacy: 'I will betroth you to myself for ever, with tenderness and love'. We can imagine the consternation of the opponents of Jesus, at the claim he was making. The early Church, however, remembered this claim as an expression of the faith they had found in the Saviour; and it has many echoes in the gospel tradition – from the words of the Baptist, who called himself 'the bridegroom's friend', to the parable of the wedding feast the king made for his son. In this sequence, Mark includes two brief parables of Jesus about the new order he announces - about new cloth and old wineskins - making it clear that he is announcing something far more radical than a reformation or patching up of the traditions of the Old Testament. In the new era he is announcing, the old traditions, which were only a foreshadowing and a promise, will give way to the final realities of God's plan.

Asceticism will have its place in the life of his disciples. But Christian asceticism will not be the human effort to achieve self-discipline and purification characteristic of many of the world's religious traditions. It will have its meaning and its efficacy through its union with the mystery of the Lord's Cross – referred to as belonging to the mysterious future, when 'the bridegroom will be taken away'.

John Thornhill sm