

Sermon for Trinity 20 Charlbury 13th October 2024
Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16.

It's always a temptation to avoid the bit about divorce and adultery in today's gospel, and talk instead about Jesus blessing the children. Add to that the tendency of the reading from Genesis 2 to make at least the female half of the population feel like an after-thought or worse, and you may well think you should have stayed at home. Someone once told me that the creation of the woman in this story is simply God upgrading the original model to something better. But, to return to the Gospel, adultery isn't the only cause of marriage breakdown and guilt isn't the only thing you're left with. The breakdown of marriage can create complex personal issues for which a pronouncement of what is right or wrong just doesn't work. But however uncomfortable Jesus' teaching on divorce might make us feel, there it is, in scripture; we cannot avoid it. So, what do we make of it, in these days where we seem to have moved beyond traditional views of divorce, when it's ceased to be the social scandal it once was?

The Pharisees come to test Jesus: 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' Both Jesus and the Pharisees know what the law says – Moses had made arrangements to allow it. Divorce was a given, but the grounds for it were a matter for controversial debate. Any answer would offend someone. John the Baptist was beheaded for criticising Herod for marrying a divorced woman. If Jesus agrees with John, he could be charged with something treasonable and end up executed, like John. On the other hand, to disagree with John's view of divorce would be to deny that John was a prophet sent by God.

But Jesus is ahead of the Pharisees. First he has them recite what their law actually says, and Jesus then says it was given because people are hardhearted – they weren't able to live up to God's vision for them, so they were given laws to regulate every aspect of their lives. Jesus doesn't say Moses was wrong, or that the law is wrong and should be ditched. Instead he turns the question from divorce back to marriage, and points them right back to the creation, to God's original intention for human beings, whom he draws together in love: 'the two shall become one flesh'. This is the deep and intimate union of body, mind and spirit, in love, trust and faithfulness: 'All that I am I give to you', as bride and groom say to each other in the marriage service. It is a truly astounding gift to give to another person, and for some this has been their experience of life-long marriage. For others, it has not, and in some cases such a gift can be dreadfully abused, and one or both partners of a difficult marriage immeasurably harmed.

In Jesus' day women had no legal right to initiate divorce, they were entirely at the mercy of men, and were always blamed for adultery. What Jesus says here gave women security within marriage where otherwise they had none, and makes each partner in the marriage equally responsible for its breakdown through adultery. It was radical, and went against the grain of religious, legal and social norms of the time. It's also worth noting that Jesus said more about forgiveness and mercy than he ever did about divorce and adultery. Even in the story (in John's Gospel) of the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus does not condemn her, and others find they cannot after all throw the first stone either, and he tells her to go and sin no more. Jesus' whole life and death was about our redemption and healing.

It's in this light that the Church of England has responded, over many years and debates, to the issue of divorce and remarriage. What churches and pastors can do so well is to provide pastoral care and prayer to people whose marriages have ended, for whatever reason, and a safe, non-judgemental space in which to help divorced couples wanting to be married in church explore their understanding of marriage, how and why the previous marriage broke down, whether they can enter responsibly into a new married relationship, whether there has been (or is a need for) healing of the personal and social wounds of their marriage breakdown, and an opportunity to explore the significance of the Christian faith in their lives. A couple in this situation have to do some very hard and honest thinking about themselves, and be willing to share some very personal and difficult things with each other and with the minister. They don't want to make the same mistakes. It's certainly not easy for them, and in the times I have had the privilege of being alongside couples who have been through this process, I have found it very moving to see them willing to come face to face with their own failure or hurt, and yet be able to come to a place of healing, where they can truly put the mistakes and in some cases spectre of the past behind them, and move forward with joy into a new beginning, through the love, forgiveness, and grace of Christ. There is much here for us all to take to heart and learn from, whether in terms of our own close personal relationships, or our life together as Christ's disciples.

Jesus' teaching looks uncompromising and difficult to accept in our modern world, where we have become used to many different kinds of relationships - married, civil, same-sex, co-habiting, multiple partners. We live in a very different context from the one Jesus and the Pharisees lived in. But even so, yes, we are still called to faithful, committed and life-long relationships. And yes, we will sometimes fail, for all sorts of reasons. It is a short step from hearing Jesus make a pronouncement the rights and wrongs of living to

thinking that he has therefore written us off if we've gone wrong. But with Jesus that is never the end of the story, not the final word. He had more time and compassion for the sinners than for those who thought they'd got everything right. He died for the sins of the whole world. He points us beyond the legalities and debates to rediscover God's intention for us to live together in love, whatever that looks like for us as individuals, as family, as church, always seeking the good and wellbeing of the other before ourselves.

For some it may be difficult for past guilt to be forgiven or hurt to be healed. For others, illnesses like dementia make life that much harder and exhausting. Prayer and confidential pastoral support are always available, and as Fergus mentioned last week we have the prayer team willing to pray with you. One of the lovely things that the Church of England has offered for some time now is the renewal of marriage vows, which can be helpful not only for celebrating a special anniversary but also after difficulties have been resolved, or in cases where a previously divorced couple were not able to marry in church. We know so well the lovely words from 1 Corinthians 13: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* We'll get some of it right, occasionally. But most of the time, with God's grace, mercy and forgiveness we will keep learning along the way, through our mistakes and successes, what love means in everyday living. Or as the marriage service puts it so well, how 'to find in good times and in bad, strength, companionship and comfort, and to grow to maturity in love'. In the end, that's what Jesus is about. Amen.

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