

Sunday 4th October 2015

Genesis 2: 18-24 and Mark 10:2-16

Jesus teaching about Marriage

Isn't this a wonderful Bible passage set for today in the lectionary?

- the picture of Jesus welcoming children to him to bless them...

I'd love to preach on that. But you know, I have never yet in the 15 years since I have been ordained heard anyone, nor been brave enough myself to tackle Jesus teaching about marriage and divorce that comes just before it.

Yet this is teaching in all three of what are called the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke

And marriage is under threat. And the concept of 'finding my own personal fulfilment and happiness' seems to dominate over concepts of faithfulness, commitment, working at a relationship, keeping to one's word.

So, even though divorce remains painful and awful, the legal process has got easier. And as marriage rates decline and the divorce rate rises the stability of families declines and it is terrible to see the devastating effects on the children Jesus was so keen to welcome.

I do not want to hurt anyone today, it is a very difficult and potentially painful area. But, I do ask you to listen very carefully to what Jesus is saying and to try not to allow any of your instinctive and quite understandable defensiveness of you to this subject to get in the way of that.

Perhaps I can start with a comment about being single. It's important that we recognise that choosing to stay single is seen by Jesus and the apostles as a special and important calling. Saint Paul points out many advantages of remaining single and of course Jesus remained single. But if you are single and hoping to marry one day, then do listen too, for I believe this teaching is for you too.

1 First to note is that Jesus is responding to the Pharisees who tried to test him.

2 Secondly, Women in Jesus culture were considered the property of their husband. Adultery in a Jewish marriage was seen more like stealing one's property and damaging it. And women had no power to end a marriage however badly their husbands behaved.

Now, Deuteronomy chapter 24 explains how a man could indeed write a certificate of divorce if his wife displeased him or showed indecent behaviour. And there were two schools of thought in Jesus time about what was regarded as sufficient grounds for divorce.

The rabbi Shammai taught that there needed to be significant grounds of sexual immorality including adultery; however Rabbi Hillel believed that a husband could divorce his wife even if he was simply tired of her. Apparently letting your husband's food burn was sufficient grounds for divorce! Budding Bake off contestants beware.

And sadly, this was the dominant view!

And Jesus wasn't happy with that at all!

Read verses two, three, four...

Jesus explains that this part of the Mosaic law was written because people's hearts were hard. It was **not** written in order to **encourage** divorce, but as a way of trying to deal with human behaviour that caused a marriage to go **seriously wrong and not on a husband's whim!**

Jesus uses arguments from Genesis 1 & 2 to remind his hearers of how marriage was designed to be by God:

“for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. And then Jesus adds these words, words that are in every wedding service as you will know: Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

So, Jesus reminds us that marriage is a good thing, a gift of God in creation, so important that it came into being before any of the law came into being.

This complementary companionship which we heard of in our earlier reading whereby Eve was created to be a suitable helper for Adam. (And note here that the word for helper does not mean in any sense subservient.)

Jesus points to the complementary companionship and mutual commitment and physical union as husband and wife leave their parents and become united to one another as one unit in God's eyes – and so is intended to be a lifelong loving bond.

Jesus also champions the cause of women by reminding his hearers of the creation account in Genesis chapter 1:

“but at the beginning of creation God made them male and female.”

Both men and women reflect something of God's image.

Both men and women are to be respected.

And rather shockingly to his first hearers, Jesus goes on explain that if a man divorces his wife and marries another woman he commits adultery against **his first wife**.

And in verse 12, Jesus appears to acknowledge the validity of the Jews nearby gentile neighbours whereby it was possible for a woman to divorce her husband.

Do you see?

Jesus isn't primarily teaching about divorce and remarriage here.

Jesus is teaching us about marriage and its importance.

Jesus is reminding us of how much God hates divorce - because of what the union of husband and wife means to God; and because of the commitment given to one another in marriage that should be honoured for life. Love is of course what holds this relationship together, a mutual self-giving. (And of course it is also an image used by the bible in many places of Christ's relationship with the Church).

So today if nothing else, if you are married, keep working at it!

Someone asked a man who was celebrating his 25th Wedding anniversary, what was the secret of his long marriage.

We take time to go to a pub for a meal twice a week: a little candlelight dinner, soft music, and a slow walk home.

The Mrs. goes on Tuesdays; I go on Fridays

Pick up one of the leaflets at the back of church that have the marriage vows printed on them. Maybe read them out to one another and reaffirm your commitments to loving one another for life this week. Remind yourself of the things you need to put in place to keep your love alive!

If you are thinking about getting married to someone, think hard about what you are promising to do – but don't let that put you off with the right person! Marriage is proven to be good for you!

And for all of us, if we know of any friends marriages that are struggling, we have a duty of care to do all we can to help support them in that marriage.

Jesus is teaching us about marriage and its importance.

Jesus teaching is also a corrective to the patriarchal society of his day, which we may need to hear as well, that women need the same respect and consideration in a marriage as men do.

I don't know about you but I find all of this very encouraging, and with many other texts contributes to the change of attitude that the church has thankfully developed in the last 20 years or so in the way that women are seen in church leadership.

But there is still the very real question we struggle with:

Does Jesus mean that if you have a divorce you should never remarry if your previous partner is still alive? That's certainly the most straightforward reading of his words, and that might be your conclusion for your own life, even if you qualify that with the much argued over exception he adds in Matthew 19 that this rule does not apply where divorce is caused by marital unfaithfulness. And Jesus seems to acknowledge it is tough teaching - for he says in Matthew 19:

And it's a question that has taxed individual Christians and the church for a long time of course.

However, as you know, in 1990 the rules changed in the Church of England and now it is possible, if the priest and PCC are happy to do so – though I perfectly understand why not everyone will agree, to allow remarriage in certain circumstances.

The parish priest is asked to satisfy themselves that among other things that the couple really do understand the purpose and meaning of marriage; that the new relationship was not a direct cause of the breakdown of the old; that they've learned from mistakes made in the past – all tricky conversations to have, and tricky decisions to make,

but all to try to uphold Jesus uncompromising teaching about the importance of the marriage bond whilst believing that the gospel principle of grace, forgiveness, and fresh starts which Jesus offers us in every other part of our lives might also be true here.

travel with me too, to Jesus sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:27 to 29 you have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery, but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.

Now in the same way that we do not believe Jesus expects us to actually gouge our eyes out for looking lustfully at someone - for I suspect that everybody here would be blind ;

I believe that Jesus **may** not be asking us to see remarriage after divorce as an actual adultery, but could be saying that to demonstrate how seriously God views marriage?

For God is not only concerned with what is on the outside. His ideals go right to the heart.

As Paul says:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

So, if, whatever our marriage history, we have all committed adultery in our hearts, and yet can be forgiven and set free, determine not to sin again, it would seem strange not to allow the *possibility* of a divorce to be forgiven, and one be set free to begin afresh with a new relationship.

So, today as we try to look into Jesus teaching about marriage, I hope we can celebrate all that is good in marriage, in our marriages....

Hope we can reaffirm the respect due to women and men, both equally important in God's eyes.

Be prompted to look after our own marriages and to help support one another's marriages. They are important to God. They are important for our society.

And we may have learned a little more I hope about the Church of England's processes for remarriage and where the dilemmas we face lie.

But fundamentally, it is right that I close with highlighting Jesus uncompromising demands for every part of our living. Married or not. His call to be holy as God is holy.

And that we are all sinners with hard hearts, needing repentance, rescue, forgiveness, a new start.

And, thank God for Jesus, when we acknowledge this, determine to live differently, we can be forgiven, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us to walk in step with the Lord, in newness of living.

Let's pray....