

7th October 2018

Mark 10.2-16

Next weekend 50 odd of us will go on a church weekend. The theme of the weekend is Walking the Way: living the life of Jesus today. We will be looking at the topic of discipleship – following in the footsteps of Jesus. We will be confronting some of the hard sayings of Jesus and the challenges of following him in the 21st century.

The passage today is often listed among the "hard sayings" of Jesus. Last week I had to preach on money and stewardship – this week I get divorce and remarriage. More hard sayings. But perhaps "painful," "distressing," or "agonizing" would be more like it, as each time this passage is read and heard in a congregation many of us cringe, either feeling assaulted by it directly or worrying that others are. I know of one minister who said a parishioner once told him that hearing this passage read in church felt like having someone dump rubbish all over her. It didn't matter if she'd cleaned up and put on her Sunday best for church that morning, because after hearing these words she felt she like she couldn't get rid of the stink of her divorce. ⁱ

Divorce can be one of the most painful experiences in life and the church should bring hope to those who have experienced this pain. To those who are badly hurt by divorce the church is a hospital. To those who acknowledge that they were responsible for such pain the church is a community of forgiven sinners. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. God loves us, and he wants to bring us restoration and healing. We have married and will continue to marry divorcees in this church – yet Jesus says some hard things about divorce and remarriage in this passage so how can we justify that?

Let us do some Bible study together. We believe in this church the Bible is our ultimate authority for faith and conduct – even the hard bits need an encounter and wrestling with. In all our reading of scripture we have to handle the written Word of God responsibly, as it points to the incarnate Word of God -Jesus and comes alive in the present through the Living Word of God - the Spirit.

Responsible bible study involves trying to understand what the context of the writing was – what the meaning of the passage was in its day – in its historical, political, social context. How has the church understood the passage through the centuries? – the collective wisdom of the ages as Christians have been open to the guidance of the Spirit on how to apply this text. But that includes now – what is

the Spirit saying now to the church and in the world in the light of our greater knowledge and understanding about life and God?

The context of this passage has Jesus on route to Jerusalem, walking steadfastly and purposefully to meet his cross and his destiny. In Mark's Gospel, location is often an important clue to interpretation.

Down by the Jordan was where John the Baptist had his ministry. John lost his head because of his criticism of King Herod who married his brother's wife. The pharisees come testing Jesus to see if he likewise will say something treasonable and then they can have Jesus arrested and killed for offending Herod. Jesus can spot the test a mile away. But he loses no integrity in how he deals with it. In public, a debate about the meaning of different scriptural texts; in private, when he back safely in house with his disciples, a sharp and direct comment about remarriage specifically referring to Herodias, the new wife of Herod, since in Jewish law a woman could not normally divorce her husband.

In order to answer that question, we need to recognize that divorce in the first century was not at all the same social phenomenon that it is in the twenty-first. There were two schools of thought about divorce in Jesus' day -- both

believed a man had a right to put away, dismiss, or divorce his wife. One school was fairly strict -- a man could do this only if his wife were unfaithful; the other was more lenient -- a man could do this if his wife displeased him in any number of ways, including, according to one rabbinic source, "losing her looks, having an unsightly mole and burning her husband's toast." Either way, the consequences for the woman were devastating -- family and public disgrace, potentially severe economic hardship, and limited future prospects for her and her children. So Jesus' words were likely intended not to set up a standard by which to judge and stigmatize but rather to protect women who were so much more vulnerable before the law than men.

So the first thing I want to say about the response of Jesus is that he wants to protect the vulnerable. Jesus doesn't just say that a man who puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery in general, he says that the man commits adultery against his wife. In the ancient world, if a man was unfaithful to his wife he was considered to have committed adultery not against her but against her father and her family, the ones who entrusted her to him. But Jesus says it's against her. So concern for the vulnerability of the woman seems a paramount concern.

One can only speculate what comment Jesus would make about a President ridiculing the testimony of a woman alleging sexual assault, and other men reasserting patriarchal domination to demean women, dismiss women and brag about how they can assault women with impunity. It is a welcome gesture that the Nobel Peace Prize was given the other day to two individuals, Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad for their struggle against sexual violence.

Jesus is always on the side of the vulnerable and the poor.

Secondly Jesus reminds us of the personal cost in all these matters. In response to the question by the Pharisees -- "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" -- Jesus actually refuses to render a legal judgment on divorce but instead turns the question on its head, shifting the conversation from legal to relational categories as he seeks protection for the most vulnerable.

He takes up the well-known passage from Deuteronomy (24.1-4) on the subject and re-interprets it -- even relativizes it -- in light of another passage from Genesis that would appear at first glance to be only tenuously related to it. And his use of Genesis itself is interesting. For most of history marriage was not about romance or fulfillment; rather, it was viewed primarily as a legal

contract, the lawful exchange of property. It may be that by linking marriage to creation Jesus intended to retrieve, and even to elevate, marriage as something more than just a legal obligation. He may have wanted to assure men and women that, in fact, God blesses our marriages and wills for them to flourish, and that any time a marriage ends in ruin it grieves the heart of God, not because some legal standard has been broken but because of the damage done to Gods' beloved children and how all those relationships are affected.

The passages from Genesis and Mark seems to assume that marriage is between a man and a woman. In this they are no different than the rest of their respective cultures. Much of the Bible also assumes, however, that a man may have several wives, that he may take concubines, and that if his wife fails to provide him a child he may seek out another woman with whom to bear children. Any number of the Bible's "heroes of the faith" -- including Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, to name just a few -- fall into this category. Further, Paul -- who says more about marriage than anyone else in the New Testament -- does not seem terribly well disposed toward the estate of matrimony at all. According to Paul, it seems, marriage is at best a curb on our passions and all too often a distraction from our duties to the Lord. Indeed, he writes

that "those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that" (1 Cor. 7:28). For all these reasons, discerning "what the Bible says about marriage" is rarely quite as easy as assumed.

A generation or two ago, we would have looked to this passage for instruction about whether or under what circumstances we can welcome persons who were divorced into our congregations, while today we seek counsel about what constitutes marriage itself. Churches have taken this passage and not allowed divorcees to remarry in church. I take this as another sign that over time our perspectives, insights, and concerns change. Our views of marriage, that is, continue to develop. And this was true in Mark's day as well. In Matthew's later version of this story, for instance, he will add an exception to the standard regarding marriage and divorce spoken Mark relates, and if you look to Paul you'll find yet another. Christians apparently have always struggled with these issues, so should we be surprised that we continue to struggle today?

This week saw civil partnerships being legalized for heterosexual couples. Most of those wanting a civil partnership seem to want it because they have a negative opinion of Marriage and its connotations: High on the list, the feeling among some that marriage as an institution

doesn't reflect their equal relationship because of its roots in traditional gender roles.

Ms Steinfeld and Mr Keidan campaigned for four years to get the law changed and more than 130,000 people signed an online petition in support of civil partnerships for everyone.

The couple said the "legacy of marriage... treated women as property for centuries" and was not an option for them. "We want to raise our children as equal partners and feel that a civil partnership - a modern, symmetrical institution - sets the best example for them,".ⁱⁱ

Some of course don't want the expense and expectations associated with a 21st century wedding.

In this case, it's worth noting that Jesus' words here aren't really about marriage, but rather are about divorce. We should therefore be cautious about pressing these verses into a strict code of beliefs about marriage in general

However, thirdly Jesus is pointing to the ideal and God's original intention and calling us back to it.

What Jesus is doing is recognizing a terrible fact; we humans can and do separate what God has united. We humans can and do fracture God's handiwork. Given all the pressures on family and marriage, Jesus was

attempting to build a rampart around the home. . The ideal of creation in the Garden of Eden was always the standard of perfection. The problem was not with the ideal, nor with the law, but with people. You do no one a service by letting standards drop or not aiming for the best. I'm quite sure no one gets married with the intention of getting divorced. Though the emergence of pre-nuptial agreements suggests some have it at the back of their mind.

But all have sinned. All have fallen short.

The Good News is that God is with us; God's mercy provides the basis of marriage and living. Our marriages and lives are not ours alone, they are gifts from God.

This scene plays out while Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, and his road takes him beyond the usual boundaries so that he may bring the gospel to all people. We also know that when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he himself will be dismissed, put away, and taken beyond the boundaries of the city to be hung on a cross in the middle of a rubbish heap. All this he endures in order to witness most fully and profoundly to God's abundant mercy, steadfast love, and amazing grace for *all* people, regardless of their condition. There is forgiveness and hope and chance of a new start.

But Jesus isn't going to endorse failure but point to the ideal. It is important to issue a call to higher ground, to build a wall around marriage in order to help defend it against the problems of the moment.

Fourthly Jesus talks about hard heartedness being the problem that leads to divorce. Vs5. He warns us against having hard hearts. Hard heartedness was the inability to have one's heart in tune with God's best intentions and plan, thwarting God's ideal for humanity.

The reasons why people get divorced are many and complex. But when a couple get married initially they have tender, gentle loving hearts towards each other. How can we keep those hearts soft and prevent them from going hard towards each other? That's the secret of a sustained and contented marriage. It becomes easy to take your partner for granted, not displaying respect and appreciation. You can become defensive when responding to criticism or deal badly with issues of conflict and disagreement. You can almost literally feel your heart getting hard as you become defensive – you draw in ready to fight – instead of being soft and vulnerable, ready to listen and be open to change. We will spend so much money on keeping fit at the gym but we don't often spend the same money on keeping our relationships fit – going

on special dates, taking opportunities for marriage enrichment courses for example.

If Jesus is offering a cure for hard heartedness and if he is articulating a rigorous return to the standard of Genesis and Eden – to God's original intention, Jesus is either hopelessly idealistic or he believes that the coming of his kingdom, the coming of His Spirit, will bring a way for hearts to be softened.

People are transformed when they open themselves up to the Spirit of Christ. This is the spiritual life we talk about when someone comes to Jesus and ask for help, ask for his presence in their life. If that repentance is genuine then God can create new hearts, hearts of flesh, not stone, hearts that are softened by the grace of God and not hard to God's love and mercy.

The fact that many still divorce indicates that this is complex and doesn't work automatically or easily. Yet there are many stories, (some are told on the Alpha Course, where we have a special emphasis on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit on people's lives), there are many stories where Christians have prayed for grace to remain faithful to their wedding vows under great stress and have found a way to survive and celebrate as 'one flesh' to show that the implicit promise is also true.

Finally what about remarriage?

We marry divorcees in this church because we believe there is grace and forgiveness and the chance of a new start. This is because we follow Jesus who never condemned people, always sought to heal and restore, accepting us in our frailty and strengthening us through his Spirit. Jesus does not forbid remarriage – read the text. However verses 10-12 are a hard reality test.

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery'.

I have already commented on these verses and also suggested that primarily it was Jesus comment on Herod and his wife and the cynical and immoral behaviour of the leadership of his country.

Is there a wider application to all divorcees? Only in this: If, and when, you move on to another marriage it is very difficult not to bring something of your previous marriage into this new relationship. It is 'adulterous' in the sense that there is another person in this relationship. There are leftovers or a hangover, depending on your experience, from a previous relationship.

Whilst I said in this church we are willing to marry divorcees, because we want to love them and want the best for them as we believe Jesus would, I would ask them questions about what they have learnt from the breakdown of their previous marriage, whether there is still unresolved feelings, especially anger and unforgiveness, and whether allowing the remarriage would be harmful to anybody involved.

The following verses 13-16 talks about Jesus' anger at those adults who suppose that children and their feelings don't matter and that adults can make whatever arrangements suit them thus preventing little children feel the warmth of God's love and welcome. Marriage break up can devastate children with long lasting effects. Which is kinder, more Christian: to say these things don't matter, or to take a strong line, like Jesus on behalf of the truly weak and vulnerable?ⁱⁱⁱ

Too many times, we who have not been through the pain and struggle of divorce are more like the Pharisees in our Gospel reading. They were not really interested in hearing

what Jesus had to say, rather they were interested in trying to trip him up. When we are rigid and judgmental about divorce, it is because we have not had to face the issue in our own lives. Have you ever noticed how rigid we are on issues in which we are not involved, as opposed to those that we need to face up to in our own lives? Remember how Jesus cautioned us about not judging others? Those who are dealing with divorce in their lives are dealing with a great deal of pain. We must avoid adding to that pain. Rather than judging, let us reach out in compassion and support. We hold onto the ideals of God's original intentions, but we hold on to also the grace and mercy of Christ for the reality of a fallen world.

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ⁱ David Lose: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1505>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45714032>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Wright, Mark for everyone, SPCK 2001, p132