

**SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: 12/2/2023:  
6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY:  
GEOFF CHADWICK: Matthew 5:21-37:  
ON DIVORCE**

One of the characteristics of Mtt's Gospel is that it has a Jewish flavour, and so we suspect that the writer's audience was Jews who had become Christians. We know this because Mtt uses Jewish terms in the text, corrects some of Mk's incorrect Geography and uses Jewish motifs to enhance the story telling. For example, Mtt has the Holy family go into Egypt and then return to the promised land. This, of course, is an allusion to the Exodus story of Moses. In a way, Jesus is portrayed as the "New Moses".

This "new Moses" idea is highlighted in today's reading as it is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Just as Moses delivered the Law from Mt Sinai, Jesus is delivering a new Law (or at least interpretation of it) from a new mountain.

Furthermore, there's a little phrase used by Jesus to highlight this "reinterpretation" idea:

*21 'You have heard that it was said... 22 But I tell you... (Mtt 5:21-22, NRSV)*

Here Jesus is deliberately reversing the usual:

*"It is written.." as used by the teachers of the Law.*

[If you're a *Life of Brian* Fan: *"It written, that's why."*]

So what's this all about?

Well the early Jewish Christians of Matthew's church would have been concerned about their Jewish Heritage. They would be wondering what to keep and what to throw away.

So Mtt written about AD90 is written to address this very issue. Mtt's Gospel is set to settle the squabbling between the *"It is written"* camp and the *"You have heard that it was said but now I say..."* camp.

Who was right?

So Mtt, in the Sermon of the Mount, endeavours to settle some of these matters. He clearly puts Jesus on the side of reinterpretation. Nevertheless, the re-interpretation is not necessarily easier than the old one!

In the section we've read today, Jesus points out that:

- 1) Common passion, if not checked can lead to the most horrendous of sins.
- 2) Everyone gets angry, but unless you deal with it early it can turn into murder.
- 3) Everyone harbours grudges, but if not forgiven they lead to inner turmoil.
- 4) Everyone lusts (otherwise our Advertising industry would fail), but if unchecked it leads to adultery.

This issue then turns to a discussion on marriage and divorce.

But before I talk about the early church, let me tell you a story.

*Along time ago in a church far far away*, I once got a phone call from a parishioner with whom I had a lot of trouble. He was estranged from his wife and children for many years, and now lived on his farm, alone. Years ago, he had refused his wife's request for a divorce by stating that it was against his Christian beliefs.

This is what he said:

*"I've just rung to tell you that you are not a true Christian because you have allowed your wife's career to dictate over your role as head of the family. She should be following your career, not the other way around!"*

Well, somewhat taken aback, and realizing there was no reconciliation here, I felt my anger rising, put the phone down and thought, (amongst other things) *"Who's got the problem here!?"*

For me this is the closest I've come to the situation in Matthew 5. A squabble over divorce and the welfare of women.

In the early Jewish church the old divorce Law would have been well known. The relevant passage from Deuteronomy reads:

24Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. 3Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); 4her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession. (Deut 24: 1-4, NRSV)

So what is this "something objectionable"?

One school of thought, promulgated by the Hillelite school, interpreted it to mean a wide range of defects in the wife alone. (Loss of beauty, laziness, inability to cook, too talkative... take your pick!)

On the other hand, the Shammaite school had a stricter view, limiting the defect to pre-marital unchastity.

If these separate schools of thought were active in the early church of Mtt, then one can imagine a fair bit of debate going on as soon as divorcees joined the church or if a couple was threatening to split apart.

Questions would be asked: "What should the church do?". So to answer the questions, Mtt returns to the remembered words of Jesus. They will find a surprise!

FF Bruce in his commentary on Paul: The Apostle Set Free, says something very helpful on this:

*[Jesus] laid down the [principle of promoting the relief and well-being of men and women] when he was asked for a ruling on the law of divorce. What was the "indecent" or "unseemliness" (Deuteronomy 24:1) in a man's wife which justified him divorcing her? The Hillelites interpreted it liberally, of a wide range of defects, the Shammaites interpreted it more narrowly, of pre-marital unchastity, but Jesus, going back behind, Moses to the creation narrative, argued from the terms of the institution of marriage that divorce was not part of God's original intention. To the minds of his male hearers, this ruling was so stringent as to be impracticable: "if such is the case of a man with his wife," they replied, "it is not expedient to marry" (Matthew 19:10). But the effect of his ruling was to correct a social imbalance which worked for the detriment of women, who had little opportunity for initiative or redress in this matter; from their point of view it*

*was a liberal ruling (Bruce, F.F., 1977, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, p59)*

Bruce reminds us that Jesus is demanding a shift of power. In Jesus' day, the man had all the authority. In the Jewish culture of the time, only the man could call for divorce (not the woman). (Roman culture was a little different.) Once divorced, a woman would become bereft economically. Unless she could return to her Father, or had Sons or brothers, there were few economic options. In many cases, begging or prostitution were the only possibilities.

Jesus elevates marriage as an ideal set at the beginning of time. By doing this he shows just how wrong everyone is. Partnership between man and woman is God's ideal Marriage and it was never meant to be a power imbalance.

This, I believe, is where my telephoning parishioner had got it wrong! He had missed Jesus' point.

This ideal portrayed by Jesus is good news for women, who had little or no power. It also was a challenge to the men who were abusing their marital power.

And so it is today!

I understand that this is a sensitive issue. Divorce is never pleasant. I am sure that all of us, one way or another, have been caught up in the complexities of someone's (if not our own), marriage falling apart. We know it is not a trivial or simple matter. In our modern era, the rules of Deuteronomy are far from our understanding of human relationships. Divorce had been trivialized in Jesus' time. Jesus pointed out that the simple act of writing a decree and evicting a wife without notice is an unjust act.

Jesus promulgated a new, radical view. It was to shock his audience into a better way. And maybe that shock is still relevant for us today.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**