

Sunday between 2nd and 8th October [27]

Mark 10:2-16

There are some gospel readings many preachers would love to see scrapped from the lectionary and this would be at the top of many lists! Jesus' judgement on divorce is as harsh as it is clear on first reading and it leaves many who read it feeling very uncomfortable. How many of us are not affected by divorce, either our own experience or that of our parents, children or other family and friends? Then we come to church this morning to hear Jesus speak with condemnation towards us, or them, with a vigour we rarely hear from our saviour and our friend.

This is a reminder that preaching is more than just talking or teaching, it is in fact a form of pastoral care. When someone preaches on a topic as close to home as this one is they are also administering pastoral care if they do a decent job, or doing harm if they get it wrong. That is always true, but it is particularly obvious when we think of divorce and other matters that affect very many of us.

Then there is the risk in this passage of it being used by people to judge and condemn so many others in so many different ways. It has been used to convince abused spouses to remain married to their abusers, it has been used to speak against any sort of family that doesn't look like a husband and wife and their natural children, excluding as it does single people, single parent families, same sex couples and their families, step families, adoptive families, the list goes on and on. If we take this quote from Jesus to be the rule about how relationships work, then a man must leave his parents, marry his wife and never be separated from her. That's what it says.

But, of course, that's not all it says. That out of context quote is as open to abuse as women must not speak in church or wives submit to your husbands. In today's gospel Jesus is answering a question about divorce, as marriage in 1st century Palestine was understood to be between a man and a woman, that is the context of the discussion. Jesus is not talking about any other type of family unit or relationship because that is not what he's being asked about. Furthermore, there is a lot we need to understand about Jewish divorce laws before we really understand what it was Jesus was being asked.

We are told the question was asked to test Jesus, this is not a straightforward question, this is a hot topic of the day. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? If Jesus said no then he would be saying that the law of Moses as found in Deuteronomy was flawed and would open himself up to scorn, if he said yes then he would have been seen by many as encouraging the breakdown of families and the destitution of woman and children, which was, I'm certain, Jesus' concern all along in this encounter.

You see the law of Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife (not the other way around) on the grounds of unacceptable behaviour, nice and vague, and there was a debate in Jewish circles as to whether that was only in the case of infidelity or any behaviour the husband took exception to. This was leading to men regularly and for no other reason than they wanted to, to divorce their wives. No courts required here, no expensive procedure, simply the man must write a certificate of divorce and issue it to his wife then it is all over. The result for the man is he is legally free to marry

another and can dismiss his 1st wife and any children from their home. When you consider that marriage partnerships were not regularly made on the basis of love or even mutual affection, it's no wonder this went on quite a lot. It was also a very good tool for a husband to use to control a wife as he could threaten divorce and there was nothing she could do to oppose it. The result for a divorced woman was likely to be destitution, shame and social exclusion. The weak marginalised by the strong.

Here is another example of how the law can be fiddled until loopholes appear. God's law in the 10 commandments forbids adultery but serial monogamy is not forbidden despite the fact that it leaves a wake of damaged, impoverished cast offs behind each failed marriage, not to mention the devastation felt by any children caught up in it. Their consciences were clear because they had abided by the letter of the law. They hadn't committed adultery. They hadn't dishonoured their original wife or the other woman. They had simply exploited a loophole in the word of God by enjoying a second, third or subsequent marriage.

Here, I think, is where we find Jesus' response to the question put to him today. He was asked is it lawful to divorce your wife. His response was to call the questioners out on their keenness to find a way of cheating the system, of going back on a promise, of hurting and making vulnerable their wives and children. Jesus speaks of love not of legal arguments. He talks of the spiritual connection from making a promise to another before God and the damage done when that promise is deliberately broken for our own selfish reasons; that is simply to marry someone we think we're going to like better. I don't think Jesus is talking about romantic love, or about different types of family, and I think he is condemning one practice in particular, that of marrying and divorcing for convenience or as an abuse of power without a thought of the effect on the spouse and children. His condemnation is of the one who harms and his concern is for the ones who are vulnerable. Perhaps that is why this reading ends with Jesus blessing the children, the most vulnerable in his society, as a reminder to us that far more important than pointing out sin is showing compassion.

So rather than reading this passage uncomfortably let us see in it the inspiration to approach people as Jesus did, looking for the vulnerable and broken, not to condemn, but to show compassion and in our own decisions, considering harm to others when we pursue happiness for ourselves. And most importantly, steering clear of self-satisfaction and judgement, lest we find we, like those questioning Jesus, despite thinking that we do nothing wrong, in fact turn away from God and separate from him as we separate from others he loves.