

6th October 2024. 19th after Trinity.
Teaching about Divorce

Mark 10.2-16/Ps 8/ Heb.1 1-4 and 2 5-12. Gen
2. 18-24

In the name of the Father and of the Son and
of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever held a baby and thought 'my goodness what a responsibility it is to raise a child?' I recently held in my arms a friend's newborn son. This tiny bundle, I thought, sleeping so gently, represented the whole of the future of the human race: he was so important in that moment that nothing else seemed to matter. I felt the weight of his future potential and maybe something of the frailty I knew he would experience in life and wondered how God sees us his children. God who knows and understands our frailties. As God holds us does he see deeply into our lives and know what the vulnerable times will be?

Today we have heard two stories about human vulnerability. Both hard to speak about for different reasons. But we cannot pick and

choose our texts or turn away from hard and difficult topics that we don't like. We at least need to try to get to grips with scripture.

The first difficult conversation Jesus has to have with the Pharisees is about divorce. Divorce which down the centuries has touched so many one way or another. Divorce which has caused so much pain to couples, families and communities.

Now Jesus lived in a time when a patriarchal culture prevailed - women were property. In some cultures today this attitude still prevails. Marriage was based on property, status and honour. It seems as though it was easy enough to be divorced particularly if a man found that his wife had done, and here I quote from Deuteronomy, 'something objectionable'. I'm not clear what we are talking about. Would it be objectionable if the meal wasn't up to scratch? Would it be objectionable if a wife was having a bad day with the children? William Barclay says, 'in Jesus' day divorce for the most trivial reasons was tragically common'. It may also be common today but I suggest that

the stress of married life for some people in 2024 cannot be underestimated.

Yet again the Pharisees are testing Jesus this time with their questions about divorce, hoping he will trip up over texts long adhered to by the Jews. We could go into the complex ins and outs of Jewish law but this wouldn't be helpful to us. Our culture today is so different. What is important is that Jesus points out God's original intent that marriage should be a covenant relationship. To reduce marriage to a matter of expediency distorts the whole concept of what God actually intended. What Jesus says is still valid today.

But in today's world I suggest it's as hard as it's ever been to maintain relationships. We live in a fallen world and fall short constantly of what God intended for us. Marriages fail for many reasons including infidelity, emotional instability, immature self-centred behaviours. People grow apart and seek different paths in life. It happens.

There has been a time when divorcing people have felt excommunicated by the church. Times **are** changing. The church has learned

through painful experience that what people need is support and encouragement not criticism and pain. They need to be offered loving care and understanding. I have heard so many stories about couples who felt divorced from their church families at a time of great need in their lives. The church now rightly extends compassion and healing to all whose relationships have proved difficult.

So what can possibly be the good news about all this? Let me tell you it's what we already know: that God gives us all a second chance. Or a third chance. Forgiveness and grace are available to us all through Christ's compassion. Whatever we have done, however we may feel we have failed, Jesus calls us to him and offers us still waters, a place of refreshment and a time to heal.

I found a piece I read by Ronald Rolheiser in his work 'Forgotten among the Lilies' quite interesting. He writes of a theology of brokenness, of the need to start again forgiven. Here is a short extract:

'If the tradition I was raised in had a fault, and it did, it was precisely that it did not allow for

mistakes. It demanded that you get it right the first time. There was supposed to be no need for a second chance. If you made a mistake you lived with it...a serious mistake was a permanent stigmatisation, a mark that you wore like Cain.

I have seen that mark on all kinds of people: divorcees, ex-priests, ex religious, people who have had abortions, married people who have had affairs, people who have made serious mistakes with their children and countless others. There is too little around to help them. We need a theology of brokenness.

We need a theology that teaches us that even though we cannot unscramble an egg, God's grace lets us live happily and with renewed innocence, far beyond any egg we may have scrambled. We need a theology that teaches us that God does not give us just one chance, but that every time we close a door he opens another one for us'.

Rolheiser may be teaching us all something about Christ's forgiveness through the cross.

It is no surprise that the rest of the gospel we heard is also about other vulnerable members of society, our children. In Jesus' day children had few rights and no social status. No birthday parties for them. No joyful balloons and being treated as extra-special for a day. Jesus blesses children because in his day they were vulnerable and scorned. Parents want to bring their children to Jesus for healing and blessing but the disciples don't understand and try to turn them away. Jesus is incensed: 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

Remember the tiny baby I held and his frailty I experienced? Jesus tells us that God is experienced in weakness, so to receive God's dominion is like embracing a child. Entering God's dominion is not a way to become first or great but a way to identify with the least. Jesus says, 'welcome the kingdom like you would welcome a child'. In other words forget the honour you thought you were awarding yourself. Remember the cautionary tale told

about the banquet: don't seat yourself at the top table, you might be dishonourably required to sit with the least socially important people instead.

We are not asked to become like children again but to humbly come to Jesus with empty hands and hearts that trust in the Grace of Forgiveness. Amen.

Corinne Craymer