

## JESUS AND DIVORCE

The Psalm reading for today fits in well with our Harvest celebrations. Sadly, our gospel reading from Mark is just not very 'Harvesty'.

But I thought I'd stick with it. Because it's interesting (and like last week's reading) has often been misunderstood.

Some Christians have used this passage to say some pretty bad things.

Its been used as a way of defining marriage. According to some Christians, here is the proof that: Marriage has to be between one man and one woman. And this means that Jesus is against same sex marriage. Its also been used to say that: Divorce is always wrong in God's eyes. And one outcome of that belief is that one person (usually a woman) in an abusive relationship has been told that they need to stay in that place.

But none of this is actually true.

The idea that Jesus' words here about marriage proves he is against same sex marriage is ridiculous.

What Jesus says about God creating male and female at the beginning of time is self-evident. And as the huge majority of people are heterosexual, it stands to reason that the most common and usual format for marriage is bound to be a man and a woman.

But that in itself doesn't mean that there can never be exceptions for that minority of people who are not heterosexual. The purpose of marriage is to provide a loving relationship and companionship and stability - and all people can benefit from that. Some will say that another purpose of marriage is to produce children and homosexuals can't do that. But neither can many male and female couples. We don't say to them that they can't be married or that if they are married that their marriage is not a true marriage.

The jury is out on who is the greatest guitarist of all time. One man who would be on that shortlist is Jimi Hendrix.

Now Jimi Hendrix was left-handed, and most guitars are made for right-handed people - as most people are right-handed. But Hendrix played a right-handed guitar left-handed. That meant the guitar was basically upside down, with the strings the opposite way around. That meant he had to learn to play chord shapes in a different way from everyone else.

But most lefties don't do that. They get themselves a left-handed guitar from the shop from the beginning.

They may be harder to find (because obviously there is less demand for left-handed guitars), but it doesn't mean these guitars don't exist, or that left-handed people should be denied the chance to play the instrument.

Just because some thing is the most common, it doesn't mean that there cannot be alternatives.

Just because most people are right handed and most guitars are made for right handed players, doesn't mean there can't be guitars built for left handed people.

Just because most people enter relationships with someone of the opposite sex doesn't mean that there can't be same-sex relationships.

Just because most people get married to someone of the opposite sex doesn't mean that there can be no marriages for people who are homosexual.

This debate that Jesus was having was not some modern discussion on same-sex marriage. Such a concept was never in anyone's mind in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. And for the whole of his life and teaching Jesus had nothing whatsoever to say about homosexuality – not one thing!

Now I don't need to say anything else here, given that our congregation here has already thought a lot about this issue and with Gods grace I believe we have come to a more compassionate and loving conclusion on this matter.

Though, given today's reading is this particular passage and given the huge amount of church people who have been divorced around the world, it's interesting that there is mostly a deafening silence on divorce from the church – a subject that Jesus spoke out against, and a huge outrage about gay marriage - a subject on which Jesus said nothing?

This is less a confrontation about marriage.

It's not really about marriage. It's certainly got nothing to do with who is (or is not) eligible to marry.

This is about divorce. It's really a debate about divorce.

So what about the idea that God is against divorce?

And what about the idea that divorce is a bad thing?

Well in our reading, there's two things that stand out.

One is that Jesus is teaching that God considers the relationship of marriage to be very important.

And not something to be easily discarded, or given up on, or walked away from.

Jesus is certainly speaking out against divorce and saying that the easy divorce is wrong, and that God's intention for marriage is that it should be permanent.

Why is divorce a bad thing? Just because God says so?

Again its pretty self-evident.

The reason is that divorce is never without sad and bad consequences.

It's the destruction of an intimate relationship.

Some divorces may be more acrimonious than others, but all divorces involve hurt and pain, usually for one partner more than another, and all divorces cause hurt to children.

No matter how 'adult' a couple may behave towards one another, the children will always be affected.

Divorce is not a good thing in itself.

But God being against divorce does not mean that God hates divorced people.

After all, it takes two people to make a marriage work but only one to end it.

There are people whose marriages have been destroyed by the choices and actions of their partner. Why should they be blamed?

And although divorce is not good, that doesn't mean that there can never be a case for divorce, or that it is better in every situation to stay together, or that someone should stay trapped in a violent relationship.

Sometimes divorce is inevitable.

Sometimes (although it is bad) it may be the best of a bad choice.

Sometimes the relationship is so toxic or abusive that it can't be saved.

Sometimes the failure of one person to make an effort means that the effort of his or her partner is not enough.

Sometimes there is no alternative.

As most of you will know, I am divorced. This was a terrible time.

I am not proud of the fact.

It hurt me, and my ex-wife and my two boys.

But looking back now, and seeing the whole picture, I am sure that it was (in the end) the right decision.

In our Bible passage today, the reason why Jesus is so angry about divorce is not because divorce is always a disaster,

or because it should never be allowed

or because divorce is an offense to the seriousness and sacredness of the marriage institution.

The reason why Jesus is angry about divorce was not to do with institutions but to do with behaviour that created obvious winners and losers.

The winners were always the men, the losers were always the women - and the children.

Never imagine that the extra wee bit in our reading about the children coming to Jesus and being turned away by the disciples is just randomly present in this chapter.

It's no accident. Children, like women, were obvious casualties of divorce.

This is a debate that starts off being about Law.

But Jesus isn't all that much interested in law. Jesus is concerned about the quality of relationships, and about fairness in relationships and protection for those who are in the more vulnerable positions.

The trouble with reading familiar words in the Bible like **marriage** and **divorce** is that we say to ourselves we know what they mean, and of course to some extent we do – but the fact is that 2,000 years ago in Jesus' time (and going back much further to the time of Moses), there were some differences to how these things worked.

People didn't get married in church or in a registry office.

Marriages were often arranged between families for economic reasons rather than romance.

When married, a woman became the legal 'property' of her husband.

And if he had enough money, a man could marry multiple wives.

If a woman committed adultery this was a great sin against her husband but if a man did it then he was sinning against his father in law and his father in law's family's honour.

As for divorce, far from being a decision that might be mutually agreed by a couple it was basically the sole prerogative of the husband.

It was virtually impossible for a woman to divorce her husband, but a husband just had to write a wee note to his wife, have it witnessed by another adult male of his choosing and the relationship was over.

Thanks to the teachings of a Jewish religious leader called Rabbi Hillel, the other astounding thing was that the reason for divorce could be just about anything.

Your wife annoys you in some slight way – divorce her!

Your wife doesn't make your breakfast the way you like – divorce her!

Your wife hasn't tidied the house to your liking – divorce her!

Your wife answers you back – divorce her!

Your wife starts to lose her good looks – divorce her and get a younger model!

And then what happens – what happens to a woman who is divorced in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestinian society? She is snookered.

It was the men who had the money.

There are no alimony payments to be made.

There is no social security in this world. No help from the state.

And of course the kids might well be kicked out along with their mother. They could join her in a life of abject poverty.

And if that mother couldn't be taken in by other members of her family, where she would be an added economic burden, and if there wasn't someone else just ready to marry her right away, then she could maybe become a slave or turn to prostitution.

So divorce in Jesus day wasn't some kind of mutual decision but a one-way ticket where men had all the power and women none.

And it underlined the belief of those days:  
that men mattered and women did not,  
that men were important and women were not,  
that men were of most worth and women were less than human.

And the Jewish Law (which was religious as well as civil) upheld this kind of discrimination.

And that's why Jesus says that the Law is wrong.

So Jesus says the Law was given years ago in a more primitive age as a kind of temporary stop gap "*because you were so hard to teach*" (v5)

When the Law allows for an unjust situation the Law is wrong.

Jesus explains once again that the words of scripture have to be set against what God is teaching today.

A writer called David Henson says this about today's reading.

*"Christian churches who emphasize the sinfulness of divorce based on this text miss the heart of Jesus' teaching. The ethical force behind the teaching isn't that divorce is wrong, but that treating women as unequal to men, as possessions, is blasphemous as both were made in the image of God."*

(David Henson Pantheos Blog: Just Marriage: Jesus, Divorce + the Vulnerable)

This is Jesus doing what he always does – standing up for those at the bottom of the ladder, taking their side, and affirming their worth.

And he's standing against any rules (wherever they might come from) that discriminate or bully or are unjust.

As I said already, the final part to our reading is that incident with the children coming to Jesus to be told (basically) that Jesus is just too tired, busy and important to have time for them.

Of course that wee story can stand on its own, but it fits in very well right here and I don't think it's an accident that Mark has put it where it is.

Jesus concern is that we treat one another with dignity and equality, with love, care and compassion and when that doesn't happen he is leaving us in no doubt as to whose side he is on.

(Psalm 8)

Mark 10:2-16

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