

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2009

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Mark 10: 2-16

"Jesus on Marriage and Divorce"

A wise preacher, confronted with this morning's Gospel reading, would surely opt to preach on the latter part of the reading – about children being brought to Jesus and the different reactions of Jesus and the disciples – rather than the question about divorce and Jesus' words about marriage, divorce and re-marriage after divorce. Having never been noted for my wisdom, I'll tackle the question of divorce and re-marriage. I do so because I think it's an important passage with which to wrestle, in more ways than one, and because it's a passage which has caused much heartache, pain and confusion among those who want to live as followers of Jesus.

Let me tell you how I intend to proceed. I shall begin by placing the teaching of Jesus in the context of his day; then move on to what the Church has done with this teaching; and finally look at how we approach this teaching today and how we treat Scripture generally.

The Context in which Jesus Spoke

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" We are told that this question was asked to test Jesus. But as it stands it doesn't make much sense as a testing question, as Jesus' response makes clear: "What did Moses command you?" In other words, what does the law teach? And the answer to that question clearly shows that it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus knew that and those asking the question knew that. (Notice that the law says nothing about a wife divorcing her husband! It was very definitely a man's world.) There must be something missing in this conversation. Perhaps Matthew's account of the same incident helps us to see what it is. Matthew records the question as: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" Now the question makes sense.

Not all Jews were agreed in their understanding of the law of divorce. There were two major schools of thought on interpreting this law. One said that the only ground for divorce was adultery. The other argued that a man could divorce his wife if he found anything at all displeasing in her. Human nature being what it is, the latter interpretation was much more popular – among men, that is! The result was that women were being divorced for the most trivial of reasons; and, in that society, a divorced woman was left in a parlous state – a social outcast with little or no means of supporting herself.

Jesus refused to get involved in this legalistic debate about the grounds for divorce. He directed their attention away from the Law of Moses to the intention of God, from law to creation. Marriage between a man and a woman is part of God's design for humankind, and what God has joined together should not be separated. But this is not a new legalism. Jesus was not laying down a new law, but was pointing to a basic principle or ideal: this is how it should be. Jesus was realistic enough to know, however, that things are not always as they should be. God's intention may be perfect, but God's human creatures are not.

After he responded to the Pharisees we have Jesus responding to questions from his disciples: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." These are the most difficult words of all in

this passage about marriage and divorce. They acknowledge that some marriages will end in divorce; they recognise that divorce may be initiated by a woman, not just a man; and they appear to outlaw re-marriage after divorce. They make marriage after divorce a more serious offence than divorce itself.

There is considerable scholarly opinion that these words purportedly spoken by Jesus to his disciples are, in fact, an addition by Mark and do not come from Jesus. They reflect and address the situation of Mark's day, and the reference to a wife divorcing her husband indicates a Mediterranean context rather than a Palestinian one.

The Church's Attitude

We look now at what the Church has done with the teaching of Jesus on marriage and divorce.

We begin with Matthew's Gospel, written some 10 to 15 years after Mark's Gospel. Matthew's community had already found this teaching too difficult, and so it modified what we have in Mark by adding three words: "Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery."

Down through the centuries the Church has wrestled with this issue of marriage and divorce. Accepting that marriage is ideally a life-long commitment and union, it has had to acknowledge that some marriages do break down, and break down irretrievably. The question has then become: may a divorced person be re-married with the blessing of the Church? For most of the Church's history the answer has been NO. In parts of the Church that is still the answer, at least the official answer.

Other parts of the Church, including the Uniting Church and its three predecessor denominations, while adhering to the principle of marriage being a life-long union, have come to the conclusion that they should offer the Church's blessing to those re-marrying after a divorce.

Where does that leave us, then, with regard to the teaching of Jesus? How are we to understand and deal with passages such as this morning's Gospel in our day?

How We Approach Today's Gospel Today

From the time of the Gospels onwards the Church has found the teaching attributed to Jesus difficult, but for most of its life it has sought to impose this teaching on its members and, sometimes, on the wider society. Many of its members have experienced the breakdown of their marriages and have left them for very good reasons. A number of things need to be said.

Until the rise of modern literary and biblical scholarship it was accepted that the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were in fact the actual words he spoke. They had, therefore, to be taken quite literally and obeyed or lived out implicitly. We now know that what Jesus said was not recorded at the time, but remembered and passed on by word of mouth – not the most reliable way of ensuring accurate reporting. We now also know that some words were put into the mouth of Jesus by the Gospel writers or early Christian communities to address situations with which they were confronted, but with which Jesus wasn't.

The Church has often failed to take into account the context in which the (Mark 10:2-16) words of Scripture were spoken or written; has often interpreted principles and ideals as binding commands; and has imbued them with a harsh legalism which was contrary to their spirit. That harsh legalism has not only damaged its members, but has also turned many away from the Church. Three weeks

ago I heard an Anglican priest speaking about the importance of inter-faith relations. In introducing the subject he said that he had been involved in inter-faith relations, not only his entire ministry, but all his life, from conception on. That sounded interesting and intriguing. He said that one side of his family never darkened the doorstep of a church; that was where the fun and love was. The other side was never out of the church, but there was little if any love there, only a harsh legalism. How often that kind of harsh, unloving legalism has distorted the Christian gospel and turned people away from the Church in disgust!

The teaching of Jesus about marriage is to be taken seriously, but it is not a new legalism. It sets before us an ideal which we should accept and strive after, while acknowledging that not all marriages will live up to that ideal; some will fail. But we must also acknowledge that the message of the gospel is that failure is not final; that God's grace is available to us to see us through our failures and to give us a new future of hope and abundant life.

What we know of Jesus from the Gospels is that he was always opposed to strict legalisms that took no account of life's realities. He encouraged people who had failed in some aspect of life to turn around and begin again. There is no reason why re-marriage after divorce should be an exception. If marriage is entered into seriously, responsibly, for a second or third time after a failed marriage, it can surely be accepted and blessed by God.

Our dealing with this morning's Gospel reminds us that we cannot read Scripture and expect to understand its message for us today if we do not take account of the context in which it was written. It also reminds us that we must not read passages of Scripture in isolation from the whole tenor of Scripture, especially the teaching and life of the One we call Lord.