

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Yr B** 4 October 2015

*Genesis 2.18-24 Psalm 8 Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12 Mark 10.2-16*

Well, you have just heard today's gospel reading, so what is your bet? Will there be more sermons in Melbourne today about Jesus and the children, or about Jesus and divorce? I suspect I know the answer! I know I would not want to hear what some preachers might say about divorce this morning. At George's I hope you will hear some good news today.

I would bet that there is not a person here this morning who has not themselves, or in their wider family been affected by a divorce or two. And as you know, my marriage to Walter is my second.

When Jesus answered the Pharisees' question about divorce he knew it was a trap. He was down by the Jordan River, the Judean wilderness. Who was the prophet most recently associated with that place? John the Baptist. And John had lost his head over a divorce. Not his own of course, but that of King Herod's wife. Herodias had been married to Herod's brother Philip but when Herod wanted her for himself, she was divorced and married to her husband's brother. You know the rest of the story, of how she engineered John's death when Herod promised her daughter anything she asked. The girl asked for the head of the Baptist. Herod's behaviour demonstrated that *he* could never be the true king that God had promised to Israel. That was why John had denounced him: so that people were not deceived.

The Pharisees quoted Moses who allowed divorce with some strict controls. Jesus pointed out that Moses allowed that because we humans fail to live up to the ideal of marriage. The ideal, Jesus says, is found in the Genesis story of the creation of a man and a woman from the earthling, the adam or 'ha'adam' the creature of dust, of earth.

Now, we assume the 'ha'adam' is male as we know male and female, but no such distinction can be made until there are two. And since it is God who created the two – male and female- no one may separate male and female: marriage is a gift of God to the whole creation.

That's why the reformers added the words '*what* God has joined let no one separate' to the marriage service. It was a medieval slogan against the false notion that renouncing marriage for the life of the cloister or the monastery was a superior choice by more spiritual people. Not so, the reformers said and said it in the context of the marriage service to affirm that marriage was not a second rate life.

So, in both stories of creation – yes there are two quite distinctive stories- the male and the female are equal and both made to be the image and likeness of God.

Jesus is saying in God's original creation there is a unity of life and purpose between the woman and the man which people fail to achieve in the 'real' world. The real world, that is, of hard hearts and jealousies and passions out of control and sheer weakness of purpose – the world you and I live in.

In this world, our world, we humans are not always able to fulfil God's original purpose, even in the best of marriages, let alone many of the immature, ill considered, or worse, abusive marriages people either create or find themselves in.

So, divorce becomes a concession in light of the complexities of human reality. God is not a God of entrapment – but to listen to a lot of church leaders, indeed to listen to church history, you would think God was. Nothing has caused more hurt, or alienated more people from the Church over the centuries than a hard line on marriage.

It seems the Church always arrives late and out of breath when changes in the laws around marriage become necessary. One example is the Church's opposition in the 19<sup>th</sup>C to laws allowing a man to marry his late wife's sister. And nothing has proven more complex for the Church to understand and speak wisely about than human sexuality.

If you think marriage in the scriptures is simple, think again. There are eight different forms of marriage in the Hebrew bible and only one monogamous couple named: Isaac and Rebecca. Even men did not *freely choose* a marriage partner although, they had more say than women who were married according to their family's interests and alliances.

Over the centuries the Church has learnt some things the hard way; from the lived experience of faithful people. In the Orthodox traditions of the east it is recognised that marriages can and do fail, and a second marriage in Church is allowed. Not so in the Latin west, the catholic tradition of which we Anglicans are part. Since divorce was not possible, a procedure called annulment has been introduced. Annulment says that no valid marriage transacted in the first place; that there was an impediment or prohibited relationship between the couple, or that one party withheld proper consent. Henry VIII was counting on an annulment, not a divorce in our modern sense, when he petitioned the Pope for release from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon who had been betrothed to his older brother Arthur. Arthur died before the wedding took place but betrothal was as binding as marriage. I wonder how different our Anglican history would be if Henry had been given what was normal at the time for a monarch. We might never have heard of Thomas Cranmer of Cambridge. Anne Boleyn would have kept her crowned head and probably died in her own bed in old age!

Many of you will recall the days when divorced people could not marry in Church. Lots of families tell stories of rejection decades and generations later. Members of the Mother's Union who found themselves divorced had to resign. The divorced as a demographic are largely missing from all Churches these days because of the harsh judgements too many received in the past.

Melbourne was at the forefront to changes in the canon law in the Australian Church. The late Archbishop of Melbourne, Sir Frank Woods agonised over the changes in Australian law in 1975 that introduced 'no fault' divorce. Before that, when a marriage broke down one or other partner had to have committed -or create- a matrimonial offence to prove to the courts that a divorce should be granted. Now, people must satisfy the Family Court that their marriage is irretrievably over, and that any children are properly cared for.

So, our former Archbishop, caught up in the debates in Melbourne and in the national General Synod, came to the view that the second marriage of divorced people must be

allowed in Church out of pastoral compassion. He gave permission for Melbourne clergy to conduct such marriages years before the national Church agreed. In all those years when the matter was being hotly debated, Melbourne Anglicans were living a new practice despite that being at variance with the past and the rest of the Church.

Our Church has a poor record of agreeing to changes in the law of marriage. We seem slow to listen to experience and slow to understand that marriage is not a contract but a covenant. God's relationship with Israel was a covenant of love but even God divorced them when the people were intent upon going after other gods and political alliances which brought them to ruin. (see Hosea 3) Mind you, being God the people were still loved, and God had already made an irrevocable covenant with all humanity in the Word made flesh, though that time had not yet come.

The covenants we humans make are best kept for life. There is no doubt than when a marriage is a life giving one, the partners thrive and the children spring up like saplings in the shelter of a large tree. But, when this does not happen – for the host of conscious and unconscious reasons we could give – then do we really believe God punishes those in failed marriages with no hope of an alternative way to live?

Human failure, human hard heartedness is not the end of the story. God enables, actually wants us, to grow beyond that and embrace the grace that always, always, no matter a failed marriage, a serious crime or even just day to day pettiness, is always, always available to us.

That's the good news I hope you hear today.

Colleen O'Reilly  
Vicar.