

BIBLE READING: Mark 10:2-16

SERMON

Many of you may have felt discomfort on your own behalf, because you, members of your family or friends you care about have suffered as they went through divorce.

So what do we do with this uncomfortable Bible passage? Do we mumble our way through it as fast as possible and move swiftly on to the nice story about children at the end?

It is important that we don't do that, especially for those of us who've been through marriage difficulty and break-up. Because this passage, more than any other, has been used to create shame and distress among those whose marriages have broken down over the centuries. Because of it people have stayed in marriages that have been violent and destructive rather than risk what they feel is the sin of divorce. Because of it, once divorced, they have turned away from the chance to find new love, new hope and new life. To add insult to injury, it has caused all this damage quite unnecessarily, because we haven't understood what it really says.

The problem is with this little word "marriage". When we hear the word "marriage" what do we think of? We think of a bride and groom, making a free commitment to each other because they want to be together. Prior to 9 December 2017, the right to marry in Australia was defined as *"the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life."* So that's quite clear then, we think – it couldn't be plainer. When Jesus talks about marriage – when anyone talks about marriage, we assume they have the same picture in mind. But actually, even a rudimentary glance at history and at the wider world might make us think again, and reveal to us that our understanding is only one among many – and probably a minority view at that.

Take the issue of consent, for example. Marriage must be "voluntarily entered into" according to Australian law. Consent is basic to a valid marriage. It's a criminal offence to force someone to marry against their will. That's why we ask at the beginning of the marriage service, "John, will you take Jane to be your wife? Jane, will you take John to be your husband?" "Will you? Is this what you want?" we are asking. If the answer is "I won't" rather than "I will" the wedding comes screeching to a halt. And I always make a point of reminding couples that they mustn't turn up to their wedding drunk! Because if you're drunk you can't give consent – and the marriage won't be valid. Consent is basic. Marriage must be "voluntarily entered into".

But most of our ancestors would have thought we were crazy to bother about such a thing. Many in the world today would not worry too much about it either. It wasn't until the late Middle Ages that the couple themselves had to consent to make the marriage valid. Before then it was only the agreement of the heads of their families that mattered. People could be betrothed to each other in a binding contract in infancy, long before they could choose for themselves. Marriage was designed to secure alliances and safeguard property. It was strategic not personal. How the couple felt about it was neither here nor there.

Think of all those folk tales where the king promises the hero the princess' hand in marriage if he slays the dragon. Does anyone ask her if she wants to be the grand prize in this trial of strength? No – it wouldn't have occurred to them that it was relevant.

And what about the business of marriage being "the union of one man and one woman"? Read the Old Testament and you'll find it is full of polygamy. Many of the Patriarchs had several wives. King Solomon, we are told, had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The Bible does disapprove – but only because some of them were foreign and enticed him to worship

their foreign gods. The polygamy was no problem at all for them. Monogamy seems to have been the norm in Jesus' day, but those polygamous forefathers never came in for any criticism. And of course polygamy is still a common form of marriage today in many cultures.

We speak of marriage as if it were a thing – like a tree or a rock or a horse – something which exists in a set form which looks the same to all of us in any age. But marriage isn't a thing; it's a social arrangement, a contract between people. And every age and culture defines and shapes that social arrangement in different ways. Our understanding of what this word "marriage" means changes constantly. Legal definitions; emotional expectations, and religious assumptions are all in flux. And just as our understanding of marriage has changed in the past, it is still changing now. In Australia, since 2017 the definition of a legal marriage is '*the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life*'. Now same sex married couples can experience the same rights and protections under Australia law.

When the Gospels talk about marriage, then, we need to be careful. Marriage, to them, was a very different experience, with different expectations, in a different context, from our marriages. We can't simply lift the words of the Gospel into the 21st century and expect to use them as a blueprint for our marriages. It would be like trying to drive a modern car with a set of instructions for a horse drawn carriage, or vice-versa– it isn't going to work. They might both have wheels and be forms of transport, but there the similarity ends. So we have to approach Jesus' words with great care, if we are going to find meaning in them for us.

Jesus is speaking to a group of male lawyers – the Pharisees – but his prime concern isn't with them, it is with the women whose lives are affected by their laws. Women who find themselves divorced in his society. The lot of a divorced Jewish woman was grim at this time. For a start only men had the power to divorce – and there was nothing a Jewish woman could do to challenge or stop them.

I know that this passage refers to women divorcing their husbands, but This is the Pharisees' attempt to get Jesus to follow his friend John the Baptist – and comment on the unheard of action of Herodias who divorced her husband to marry his brother Herod. To a Jew, a woman divorcing her husband was incomprehensible - a nonsense. But Jewish men could divorce, on virtually any grounds, by simply handing the woman a certificate of divorce.

Divorced men remarried easily, but it was much rarer for a divorced woman to remarry. She was regarded as damaged goods. Her ex-husband was supposed to repay her dowry, but often didn't. Her birth family were supposed to take her back, but often they refused to take her in either. And so many divorced women ended up destitute, with no one to support or protect them.

What could she do? Starve? Turn to prostitution? Sell herself into slavery? When Jesus forbids divorce he isn't making some iron clad statement about the permanence of marriage in any society at any time. He's concerned for the here-and-now plight of the vulnerable, penniless women of his own time.

Now, thank God, things are very different. Although divorce still often has profound economic consequences, couples don't have to stay together to avoid destitution any more, and sometimes parting is the lesser of two evils. That doesn't mean that Jesus' words have nothing to say to us – it's just not quite the same message now as then.

He reminds the Pharisees that they are "one flesh" with their wives. Marriage, he says, involves the intricate weaving together of lives – we can't just shrug someone off as if they never existed, throw them away and move on. This is where this message really touches us

today, because it is still true. Those of us who've been divorced have felt that "one flesh" ripped apart. They know how deep the wounds of divorce can run. Those wounds don't have to be fatal, as they often were for divorced women in Jesus' time, but they are still very real, and, depending on what we do with them, they will either heal or fester. If we pay attention to them they can become sources of wisdom for us. If we ignore them they can poison any new relationship as well.

Jesus' message to us here is not about the permanence of marriage. We can't read his words as an inflexible and permanent set of rules, because the model of marriage he was talking about is completely different from ours. But his words remind us of how deeply we are woven into with those who've shared our lives, and how damaging it is when we try to wipe out the past as if it never existed. It is damaging for us, and damaging for others too, because to do it we have to wipe them out too, as if they didn't matter.

This isn't just a lesson we need to learn within marriage – it is about all our relationships. We're not just "one flesh" with our spouses; we're also, according to the Bible, "one body" in Christ with all our brothers and sisters, united to one another and to God as well "for whom and through whom all things exist,". We are made to be in relationships; we need them to be fully human; relationships with spouses, partners, friends, neighbours - and brothers and sisters in the faith. It is not good for us to be alone, says God. Sometimes those relationships are bound to fail. Christ calls us, when they do, to behave with compassion and integrity, and to draw on the eternal love of God, so that even in these most broken places of our lives, healing and new life can grow. Amen.