

Sermon preached at St Stephen's

4 October 2015

Readings: Psalm 26

Mark 10: 2–16

“...and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant...”

Today's story has words that are likely to make us cringe. Generally speaking it can be hard to hear them as good news! To talk about divorce can open for many people, a whole range of different wounds and experiences. Shock. Hurt. Confusion. Anger. Frustration. And I think I know most of you well enough to be able to say that for some of you those feelings have been yours, personally, or the feelings of family members whom you love. So responding to the first part of our gospel story, rather than skipping over it to the assumed safe, second part, may bring back some of those feelings again. While I would regret that, I hope what I do say will be both honest and gentle.

There's rather a lot going on in this short passage – more than meets the eye. This passage has been used to do a lot of damage to men and women through the ages because of what has been taken to be one of Jesus' clear pronouncements on human behaviour, even though the words seem to be in clear contradiction to the way he behaved. Because it is part of an ongoing debate within our church as to who is an appropriate person to be in a position of leadership and because Pope Francis has brought the place of divorced persons in the Catholic church into the public domain I want to do some work with how we understand this piece of scripture.

Jesus' sayings each had a context, that is, they were said somewhere and to someone as the primary audience, and the context should inform the way we understand it. Jesus and his disciples had left Capernaum and gone to Judea beyond the Jordan. They were in the region where John the Baptist had preached. They were also in the jurisdiction of Herod. And John, remember, had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” And Herod had him killed as a result.

So, in the region in which John preached, Jesus was asked to address the same topic. The Pharisees' objective becomes clear. They asked him a yes or no question and figured they had themselves a win/win situation. Jesus' only options were either to repudiate the law or to repudiate John. Either way, he loses. Mark has offered evidence of collusion between Pharisees and Herodians before, and will show them trying again. Jesus is now in their sights. And we, as readers, see Jesus in the shadow of John's execution.

In my counselling and pastoral conversations one of the aids I use is open, honest questioning. An open question is one which doesn't have a simple yes/no type, or single word or short phrase answer. If they do, they are closed questions and stop the possibility of expanding our answers to make sense. You know the old chestnut, Have you stopped beating your wife? and similar sorts of questions. They can't sensibly be answered with one or two words. Then the second part is that of it being an honest question. An honest question is one where the questioner cannot know what the answer might be. The Pharisees' question is neither open nor honest. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

It turns out however that while the Pharisees thought they had Jesus in their sights, they were actually in his sights. He takes them head on: “Moses' law was a response to your hardness of heart - not God's will. The law is a compromise between the will of God as made manifest in creation and the reality of human free will.” Jesus seems to come down supporting the position of John, upholding the law behind the law. And the Pharisees had no response. That in itself is a clue to what is going on. It is not about the pastoral concerns within the community about whether divorce is acceptable or not. It is about setting up a legalistic trap to ensnare Jesus in Herod's web. No worry what collateral damage might be done to others in the process, it was more important to try and catch out Jesus. But Jesus wasn't interested in legalities, he was much more interested in the ideal, God's intention from the very beginning.

Where things get muddled in the church's thinking in my view comes from the next conversation with the disciples. You see, they weren't prepared to let this one go. But then they've been wrong before. They misunderstood the feedings, they argued about the Pharisees leaven, they have just had a lecture on not causing anyone to stumble, a reference to the Pharisees use of the law to make life difficult for everyone but the most righteous. They heard Jesus' reply as a legal reply to a legal question. They still don't get it.

So Jesus invites them to look beyond the petty human laws which are about failure and exclusion and not about joy and gladness for all; to look into our 'original blessings' before our 'original failures', to the way God intended human beings to relate to each other, to seek their true selves, and to find their true joys. That has a different ring to it, and it puts the debate into a different arena!

It seems that at one level, Jesus was confronting the arrogance which had made divorce primarily a male privilege. He was angry with their treatment of women. His words about divorce and the hardness of men's hearts are a social justice protest. But even more they are a protest against moral and religious legalism, which does not put you closer to God but further away. Jesus was not putting a ban on divorce. He was putting a ban on self righteousness. Apparently promoting strict prohibitions, Jesus introduces radically new affirmations of equality, not letting go of the ideal. This exchange was never about divorce. Let's not make it that now. For we can all acknowledge that divorce, even if the best option, is still a matter of grief. Divorce, even if chosen, is the death of a dream, and that is always a source of grief and loss.

The disciples show they still haven't got it because in the next instance they are working hard to stop children coming to Jesus so he can touch them. Our old Sunday School pictures have nice clean children, but the word for touch points to mothers wanting Jesus healing touch for their children, their snotty-nosed, weeping-sored, dirty-faced, crying and whimpering children. The disciples wanted to protect Jesus from these. But the disciples shooing away the children is also a case of 'separation' or 'divorce'. Divorce between the children and Jesus. Jesus became indignant. He intervened. He said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them." Could it be that he was still thinking about the reality of the death of dreams - of relationships? These two stories stand on their own in the other gospels, but here Mark places them in this particular order. Perhaps he saw that Jesus was still thinking about those without power in relationship, and having considered women, he now gave thought to children. For children are often the ones who pay the most in cases of divorce.

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them." These are the ones who always need to be welcomed; who need to have no question, absolutely no doubt about the fact that they are always wanted - that they are always appreciated - that they are always loved. It is always to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Who reach out in need and in trust. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took the children up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them."

God created people to be in relationship. God created people to live in trust and commitment. The reality of life together is that we so often fall short of how God created us to be. The word Jesus offers in such circumstances is not legalistic or issue oriented, but person oriented. Don't forget to grieve. Grieve the loss of what was important, the death of what was so precious, the future once envisioned together. Don't forget to grieve. And then make sure no one is operating from a position of privilege and power and someone else in any kind of imposed submission. And don't forget to love the children. For they, who have not yet done anything that could count as a claim for a reward from God, receive the right to participate in the kingdom as a pure gift, that is, on the basis of God's grace alone. Anyone who wants to enter the kingdom must relinquish any claim they think they have and humbly receive God's sovereign grace.

The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word.