

Mercy and Marriage

Reflections on Jesus' words in Mark's Gospel ch. 10 vv.2-16

So – how do you feel about this morning's Gospel reading? It is definitely one of those 'hard sayings' of Jesus, isn't it?! The disciples themselves, just like the others in the story, are taken aback. And so too, I think, are we, if we are honest. Then, and now, Jesus' words appear to be both uncompromising, and also, to many of us perhaps, even unkind. For I would think that most, if not all, of us here have some family connection with divorce. Either we are divorced ourselves, or are married to a divorced person, or we are children of a divorce, or have children, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, nieces or nephews, or some other family member who has been through a divorce. Are all of our families then guilty of breaking an unbreakable law of God? Are all those who have been through divorce irreconcilable failures in love? How on earth does this fit with the God of compassion and forgiveness we hear about elsewhere in the stories of Jesus? It can be very perplexing.

Let me then offer a few reflections on the context and meaning of this Gospel passage, and on its application to us today. Firstly, and most importantly, I want to say that we are not helped by either reading this Gospel passage literally, in a simplistic conservative manner, *or* by reading it in a relativist way, in a kneejerk liberal manner. On the one hand, this passage is there in the Gospels to offer an *enduring*, if uncomfortable, counter-cultural challenge. On the other hand, it is to be understood in the *context* of Jesus' own times. Too often in our Christian discussions, we fail to hold these two things together.

For Jesus is not talking about sexuality in general here, nor even about divorce in general. He is speaking specifically about *male* heterosexual divorce. This is really important. For Jesus is speaking in the context of a world very different from our own. Marriage *today* is fundamentally associated with romantic love. Marriage *then* was fundamentally based on property and inheritance. Marriage *today* can last for 50, 60, 70, or more years, often with many changes of place, work and other interest and activity. Marriage *then* was often abruptly ended by illness or sudden death and it took place in an often rigid set of limited place, monetary, class and gender expectations. Above all, marriage *then* was determined by men, with little or no legal rights for women. This makes the context into which Jesus is speaking very different from our own. This, as I said earlier, does *not* mean that we can simply ignore it, as belonging solely to its own era. As with other 'hard sayings' in the holy scriptures, there is much more value to be gained from wrestling with it. Yet it does mean that we should concentrate on *why* Jesus says what he does, rather than simply *what* he says. Above all, we need to remember that this is part of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees over their interpretation of the Jewish Law. For Jesus is recasting the law in a wholly new way.

In this Gospel passage, the Pharisees are trying to test Jesus. Of course they know perfectly well what is written in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 1-4: a scripture passage which clearly assumes that divorce will occur and gives helpful procedures for carrying it out. What they are really interested in is exposing Jesus as a moral threat. For Jesus had already spoken publicly about how God's family consists in those who follow him, rather than in blood or legal relationships. Now they want to catch him saying something else to suggest he is a scandal and a threat to family life. For they, like some religious hardliners today, are more interested in maintaining their own ideas of social order than in really living in the dynamic love of God. Jesus however refuses to play the game. For Jesus, especially in Mark's Gospel, is really not interested in finding laws or simplistic morality in the scriptures. Instead he takes the discussion to a higher level. He directs our attention away from law and morality to the purpose and person of God. He raises the stakes from our human desires to God's hopes for us.

Jonathan Inkpin

So let me suggest three things we can take from this challenging passage. Firstly, we are encouraged to look beyond our self-serving morality to God's compassion. For at first sight, Jesus seems to be far more hard-hearted than his opponents in not allowing divorce in *any* circumstances. Actually he is far more compassionate. For, in those days, a woman who was divorced became a social and financial outcast, a figure of shame and poverty. Jesus is thus speaking out to protect the vulnerable: in this case, women whom men had tired of or regarded as a burden. The Pharisees and others in Jesus' day were therefore not more liberal than Jesus. They were simply more devious in ensuring religious backing for the whims of husbands. This is then, first and foremost, a Gospel passage which reaffirms Jesus' compassion and commitment to the weak. Not for nothing indeed, is this passage immediately followed by that in which Jesus speaks about the value of children. For children, like unwanted wives, were also deeply vulnerable people who had little or no rights in Jesus' day. Jesus is therefore challenging us to continue to be responsible for one another even if this is not the most comfortable thing for us.

Secondly, this passage encourages us to lift our eyes to God and to God's vision for us. This is part of the value of a conservative insistence on wrestling with, not simply relativising, scripture. For Jesus doesn't join in the lesser human game of legal niceties and moral relativities, some of which are no doubt inevitable in our fallen world. Instead he directs our eyes to our divine calling and the purpose of our lives. We are created, he says, to fulfil God's dream of loving relationship, with each other, with others and with God. Marriage isn't about law, or pre-nuptial contracts, or what and when you can get out of it. Marriage, like other Christian callings, is about growing in relationship. It is becoming so much greater than we are now, as we let go of our own selves to share in something much greater and of eternal value. Ideally marriage is thus, as one writer once put it, a 'little church': a relationship in which we can try to put into practice all those Christian virtues which are so essential for true and lasting joy: virtues such as forgiveness, self-sacrifice, patience, fidelity and endurance. Of course, marriage, like other Christian callings, doesn't always work out perfectly. Yet, without the glorious vision of what might be, we are simply trapped in our own personal desires and limitations.

And then, thirdly, as an obvious corollary, this passage throws us back upon God's grace. In recent times, the Anglican Church has reflected deeply upon this passage, in relation to what else Jesus says and does. In doing so, it has come to the view that Jesus might say something a little different today: or, at least, something else, in the context of today's quite different realities of marriage. For just as Jesus said 'the Sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath', so we may also affirm, in the spirit of Jesus, that 'the Bible is made for human beings, not human beings for the Bible.' What we find in the Bible is there to help us grow in holiness and faithfulness to God's calling. It is not there for us to tie ourselves in unnecessary or impossible knots. Whether we are single, married, divorced, or remarried, the key thing is to centre ourselves more fully on his grace and forgiveness, whatever our relationships are, or may have been. For, as Mark's Gospel makes clear, all disciples of Jesus always keep failing, in whatever vocation they are called to, whether as a married or a single person. For whilst Jesus sets us God's highest standards for which to aim, the heart of following Jesus is beginning again: turning back to Jesus when we fail and starting again through the power of his love and grace. So let us be merciful to one another. As one of the greatest of all religious poets (Rumi) once wrote:

'Come, come, whoever you are,/ Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,/ It doesn't matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair./ Come, come, even if you have broken your vows/ a thousand times:/ Come – come yet again, come. Amen.

Jonathan Inkpin