

Proper 22, Trinity 17
Wirksworth HC, Idridgehay HC

Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Basing this homily on today's readings, it would be easy to harangue you about the sanctity of marriage and the sinfulness of divorce. I am not going to do that, because there is a problem with such a simplistic understanding. When we read Holy Scripture we do well to have several questions at the back of our minds, such as:

- why was this written?
- how long after the events it describes was it written, so is it reliable?
- at whom was it aimed, and why?
- in whose interests was it written?

In this particular Gospel passage, for example,

- it is useful to know that Mark was writing about 30 years after the crucifixion, when the eye-witnesses were beginning to die, so a record needed to be made – and fast while someone could still remember
- it is useful to know that Mark's gospel is the shortest and most telegraphic in style.
- we need to see that the Pharisees were trying, once again, to trap Jesus into saying something that they could criticize him for, but he gives an answer which they don't expect, and which turns the tables on them by asking them what Moses allows.
- it is interesting to know that Jesus turns accepted rules in favour of women (material for another sermon)
- it is relevant to know that Jesus is speaking to people governed by the much-divorced Herod family, and he may have wanted to twist the knife in the wound a bit here (where did we get the idea of Gentle Jesus, meek and mild?)

I could go on.

Mark, in a hurry, is very blunt and very direct. His message is subtly different in Matthew (later) and Paul (earlier), both of whom soften Mark's teaching subtly, Paul, for example, allowing separation, or divorce, on grounds of porneia immorality.

This modification of what seems to be harsh teaching is, therefore, necessary. After all, Paul's account was earlier than Mark's – could Mark in his rush to get things on paper have got it wrong?

This is why reliance on Holy Scripture alone is dangerous. Holy Scripture is interpreted in the context of doctrine, tradition and experience. And this is one of the characteristics of the Anglican tradition: the use of discernment, allowing the Holy Spirit, or Divine wisdom, to work through us in the interpretation of Scripture.

So then we need to stand back from all three readings to get a wider vision. And what they seem to be saying to me concerns relationships.

The picture of the Godhead that we hold is one in which God consists of a triangle of relationships: Father and Son, Father and Spirit, Son and Spirit – already a community within the Godhead.

And marriage, or indeed living together, is a relationship and is therefore in some sense a reflection of this divine household. All of us who live or have lived with someone else, married or not, sexual partners or not, know that we grow together, and that what affects one affects all.

So the law of Moses might be one thing. But in the Christian faith, as we heard in the postcommunion prayer last week, love is the fulfilment of the law – or, the law is superseded by agape, caritas. And agape, caritas, we know, like divine wisdom, is patient, kind, tender, compassionate. God is love, and love is patient, kind, tender, compassionate.

So why do we humans so often find relationships difficult? Relationships between family members, relationships between work colleagues, relationships in the church, relationships on the PCC.

It comes down, of course, to the fact that we are humans, and we suffer to a greater or lesser extent from pride in all its forms. Pride, ambition, hypocrisy – the opposites of what love should be – and, this may come as a surprise to you, I suffer terribly from all this. It is even possible to have negative pride –

continuous self-criticism is inverted pride, the notion that my sin is so bad that not even the Lord can forgive me.

In all our relationships we should remember that we are made in God's image.

Jesus is the perfect reflection of God – wisdom terminology. We have Christ within, as Paul and the church fathers tell us. And all of us will see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, and approach that image as Wesley says: finish then thy new creation.

Mankind was made little lower than the angels, and God became man. So we are capable of approaching Godlikeness in relationships. And to do this, today's Gospel suggests but we need the openness of children – childlikeness.

We need to stop resisting God's grace implanted in us.

We need to receive Divine love as gift – we do not need to earn it, just bask in it like whales basking in the sunshine.

All we have to do is recognize Christ's presence, and feed from him in our hearts, as we shall shortly be invited to do at the holy table.

'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' Matthew, Paul, Peter and John all tell us that we can share in the divine nature, our unlimited intimacy with God cleansing our worldly sin and disease. We need to cooperate with the Christ within.

Life is full of difficulties, and cooperating with the Christ within, exposing our inner selves to God's healing grace, might enable us to be sensitive and gracious in dealing with these difficulties. Knowing when to yield, putting yourself in the other person's shoes, trying to see their point of view. And, of course, knowing when to call it a day: Christ was not one to flog a dead horse, and neither need we. I need to heed this advice as much as anyone.

It's through dealing with difficult experiences that we grow – tested in the refiner's fire. When we enfold our past, when we absorb and learn from our experiences, we can allow them to help us to help others: our pain and joy can help create a source of healing for others.

God's mercy can be our mercy. And we might remember that God's mercy is not limited to my likes and dislikes, or even yours, or yours.

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictures
With a zeal He will not own.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be all gladness
for the goodness of the Lord.

Amen.