

**7 October 2018**

**Genesis 2.18-24**

**Mark 10.2-16**

**Made for Togetherness**

Back in 1985 the Christian writer, Richard Forster, wrote the book *Money, Sex and Power*, with the subtitle, *The challenge to the disciplined life*.

This is what he says about these issues of money, sex and power:

“No issues touch us more profoundly or universally. No topics cause more controversy. No human realities have greater power to bless or to curse. No three things have been more sought after or more in need of a Christian response.”

Over the next three weeks our lectionary readings effectively take us into each of these themes.

Next week we will be looking at the story of the rich man who came to Jesus asking about eternal life ... and Jesus challenged him about his relationship with his wealth.

We will be into money.

The week after we have the story of the mother of James and John asking Jesus to give them places of importance in the kingdom ... and we will find Jesus somewhat challenging response.

We will be into power.

And today we have a debate about marriage and divorce.

We are into sex and relationships.

Now there is a tendency for the church to get rather more hot under that collar about issues of sexual morality than we ever do about money and power. And we probably need to recognise that Jesus had much more to say about money and power than he ever had to say about sexual ethics.

But nor can we avoid the issue of sexual ethics. Although, as we will discover as we explore this issue when things go wrong in sexual relationships the problems

are more likely to be down to issues of power and money than they are about sexuality itself.

You only have to look at the Me Too campaign, which began with the sexual abuse of women in Hollywood to see that what was actually happening was fundamentally an abuse of power and money – men of influence and wealth assumed that because of that influence and wealth they could take sexual advantage of women.

Now I realise that if I had been preaching on this passage a hundred years ago the whole social context and attitudes to marriage and divorce would have been very different to the context today. I would have been able to have taken the words of Jesus pretty much at face value, and few people would have questioned them.

Divorce for Christians would have been extremely rare, and nearly always shameful. And re-marriage after divorce would have been unthinkable in the church – it would have been a quiet affair that took place at the registry office.

So how do I stand here today, taking these words of Jesus seriously, but pastorally taking a rather different stance than that taken by most churches just 100 years ago?

While divorce will always be painful, I do not take the view that people should be shamed and shunned when their marriage breaks down. People deserve pastoral support and understanding when going through such trauma, even if they have contributed to the breakdown of the relationship.

And when people are in abusive relationships they should be positively supported in freeing themselves from those relationships.

And on a number of occasions through my ministry I have been privileged and delighted to be involved in marrying people who have previously been divorced – and I have had great confidence in pronouncing God's blessing on their marriages.

And today I also stand as one who would support life-long, committed same-sex relationships – now that *is* a point of controversy within the wider Christian church today.

But how do I put all of that together with what appears to be the face value of what Jesus says here?

- he appears on the surface to be pretty much against divorce – ‘what God has joined together let no man separate.’
- and he appears to rule out remarriage after divorce as adultery in a different guise

Jesus is faced with a question about divorce – a live topic in his day.

This opens the field for Jesus to go back to basics ... to talk about God’s original creative intent for human life. And he goes right back to the creation story, and what is effectively the second story of creation in Genesis 2.

This story has been used in all sorts of ways over the years – particularly to support the idea that women are subordinate to men –

- created as a ‘helper’ for man ... a kind of subservient lackey
- and created out of the rib of man ... a kind of off-cut

But those two features of the story can equally speak of God creating women as equal and complementary – made from the rib of man – of the same stuff – and so equal. And made as a helper in terms of complementing man so that only in their togetherness, in their mutuality they find fulfilment in life. A picture of both difference and equality.

This can be taken as a picture of the way in which we have been created as women and men, as different people – all different, all equal, needing each other, and with the need to reach our potential, our fulfilment, our destiny only in reaching out to those who are different to ourselves and discovering that creative partnership that human life is all about. Made for togetherness.

And in a more narrow context, this story was always accepted as the basis of the marriage relationship – with the implication that the proper place for the expression and fulfilment of our sexuality is in the long-term, committed relationship of marriage. Sexuality and committed relationship go together.

And this set the Jews apart from their wider social context. And Jesus gives his wholesome support to this view by his statement here, believing that in this is the wisdom of God.

The wider society of the Roman Empire was much looser in its approach to sexual ethics. It wasn’t quite ‘anything goes’ – but there was certainly an

acceptance that sexual relationships were not confined to the institution of marriage. A more promiscuous toleration of sexual relationships was evidenced in a number of ways. For example, some of the religions of the time had temple prostitutes – sexual promiscuity was sanctioned by religion. In another example, it was acceptable practice for a man who had female slaves to expect that he would be able to have sex with them. They ‘belonged to him’ and he had sexual rights over them.

But the Jews held this rather unique outlook on things – that the proper place for the expression of our sexuality is within the committed relationship of marriage. This, they believed, was God’s creative intention for us. And this is what Jesus wholeheartedly supports in his comments here – if anything strengthening this commitment ‘ “What God has joined together, let no man separate.”

Looked at in this way, marriage is not first and foremost a command, but it is God’s invitation into a way of life that is fulfilling, healthy and wholesome. And when the expression of our sexuality is set within this context – the context of an equal, mutual, complementary and supportive relationship – that is the most fulfilling context for the expression of our sexuality.

This is wisdom. This is good sense. This is a description of what it is to live a life that is within the blessing of God.

This is not a burden that is placed upon our lives, but a way of life to be explored and enjoyed.

Now, I would want to say that within this overall picture of God’s intention for us, there are many ways for us to discover God’s creative intention for our lives.

The important thing for all of us is that we are made for togetherness. But the way in which that ‘togetherness’ will take form in our lives is different for each one of us.

Some, indeed many, will find it in the married life. But others will find it also in the single life – and society’s and the church’s obsession with marriage and family has sometimes given the single the signal that somehow they have missed out on God’s perfect intentions for them.

The single are also able to explore this wonderful field of what it means to live in togetherness ... but they will do it in different ways.

And I believe that there is also a place for those who are attracted to people of the same gender to find fulfilment through long-term committed relationships – also discovering that the most fulfilling context for the expression of sexuality is in relationships of mutuality, equality, trust and commitment. The underlying principle is that the proper place for sexuality is within the stability of a long-term committed relationship.

So what of divorce?

The first thing to note is that Jesus wants to make it clear that the command of Moses that makes allowance for divorce is a very different kind of command that establishes marriage in the first place.

The law that establishes marriage as part of God's intention for human life is what we might call a first order command – it expresses God's original creative desire and intention for us.

When God set things in motion, as it were, this is how God intended it to be for us – this represents part of that world that God saw to be very good.

The law that allows divorce is a very different kind of law, according to Jesus. This is a second order law that only comes into play when things go wrong. This is a 'permissive' law that reduces the kind of harm that might come about because of "the hardness of man's heart".

This law doesn't reflect God's original creative intent for us – it reflects God's readiness to respond with love and compassion to our mistakes, and gives us a way out and a way forward when things have gone wrong.

This is a really important distinction – Jesus wants to make it clear that if we make space for divorce, we should not do it in a way that undermines or undervalues God original intention for our lives.

We are not saying that God has now changed the rules, or lowered his sights for us – we are simply recognising the tragedy and the failure of the human heart. We sometimes mess things up.

But also, we need to be saying, that when we mess things up, God has a redemptive plan for our lives – God isn't someone who is only stuck with a plan A, and never had a plan B to turn to.

The problem with the church's approach to marriage and divorce for far too long was that it seemed to assume that it was God's desire that people should be trapped in relationships that were no longer a blessing to them, but had become a curse.

And I do not believe that we can be followers of Jesus and believe that God is OK with people being in relationships that systematically destroy them, because the relationship had gone sour, because there is an abuse of power, or someone is starved of all respect, dignity and affection.

But what is always important is that we acknowledge that this has happened because things have gone wrong. And that's not always about apportioning blame – and certainly not about making people feel guilty and shamed.

But the second thing to note in this passage is that Jesus is responding to a debate about divorce that is very much about the abuse of male power in the marriage relationship.

In Jewish law at the time, it was only the man who was able to divorce his wife. A wife could not initiate a divorce.

And when someone committed adultery, the harmed person was always a man. When a man committed adultery, he did not commit adultery against his wife, he committed adultery against the husband of the married woman he slept with! (I haven't quite worked out who he committed adultery against if he slept with an unmarried woman!)

And the real debate that was going on at the time was on what grounds a man had the right to divorce his wife. Some said that it was only on grounds of adultery. Others claimed that it could be on other grounds ... with one rabbi probably a century after this claiming that a woman burning a meal might be sufficient grounds for divorce.

And I think part of what Jesus is doing here, is undermining this debate that had almost become a debate about the rights of men over their wives. It was essentially about power. And I believe that Jesus wanted to undermine this

debate by reminding them that the question of divorce was not a question of rights, but a redemptive response when things had gone tragically wrong.

The tone of the debate threatened the original intention of God for wholesome relationships.

And it is interesting that when Jesus talks about divorce and adultery he talks about both men and women initiating divorce, and he talks about men committing adultery against their wives! The women are recognised as the hurt and the sinned against.

And then we have the difficult question of re-marriage after divorce. Jesus' words seem to condemn the re-marriage of the divorced as another form of adultery! And if it is adultery, surely it is to be condemned?

But that depends on how Jesus is using language here. Is he using language in a literal sense, or is he using over-extravagant language to make a point.

Elsewhere you may remember that Jesus talks about the law against murder ... and goes on to say that anyone who calls his brother a fool has committed murder.

Now we instinctively know that Jesus isn't using language here literally, but he is making his point powerfully. And that may be just what Jesus is doing here with re-marriage of the divorced. He is underlining his point that any redemptive response to those circumstances when marriages fail must not undermine our affirmation of God's original creative intent for our lives.

So I would take the view that, acknowledging the pain and tragedy of when things go wrong in the marriage relationship that has fallen short of God's creative intention for us, those who have been divorced should not be prevented from entering into another relationship. That part of God's redemptive plan for them may be to bring blessing into their lives through the joy of a fulfilling, mutual and committed relationship.

We are made for togetherness.