

Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Trinity

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

"Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters"

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to acknowledge the range of feelings no doubt present in the room as this morning's gospel was read. Notice how you reacted. Maybe some of us didn't have much of a reaction but perhaps, some of us, as we realised what passage it was, braced ourselves.

"Great", you may be thinking, "another sermon on marriage where I can feel guilty: either because I am no longer married or remarried or have never been married, or because I'm married and every sermon about marriage makes me feel guilty anyway. And even better, the ordinand is on duty. Here we go..!"

So, as we begin, I want to assure you that we are going to find that this gospel passage is good news for everyone, no matter how you felt listening to it. And while we will explore Jesus's words here, we won't go into some of the details. This is not the time and place, nor am I the person, to dive into some of the more technical questions that Christians might disagree on around marriage and divorce. If you want, take them away as homework but we're not going to cover them now.

So, with that said. Let's consider what exactly is going on in the passage.

The Pharisees come to test Jesus. They ask him a question: "is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" In Matthew's account, the question is more specific: "is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?"

However exactly it was expressed, this was a politically charged question. Earlier in Mark, we learn that John the Baptist was imprisoned and eventually killed because he had condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife. Perhaps, the Pharisees were trying to push Jesus into a similar confrontation with Herod — get him thrown in prison and out of the way. Perhaps they were simply asking him an awkward question— trying to work out which rabbinical school he was in where exactly he stands on The Rules.

Over the last twenty months, we've got used to conversations about The Rules and identifying different schools of thought. There's the cautious school and the loophole school. And then there are those who just disregard The Rules entirely. And whether it's about divorce in the 1st century or Covid in the 21st, there is always the risk that the question is reduced to "what can we get away with?"

This is a particular temptation for the powerful. Those of us who have resource and freedom— and that's everyone here— often respond to any Rules by trying to minimise how much they affect us. On the other hand, to be powerless is to lack this agency, to be unable to opt out from The Rules.

This week of all weeks, it should not be lost on us that the form of advantage under discussion in this passage is gender. Regardless of whether they have Herod specifically in mind, the Pharisees are asking Jesus how easy should it be for a man to divorce a wife? In a society in which women were economically dependent on men, under what circumstances is a man no longer required to meet his obligations to his wife?

Jesus is asked to arbitrate on male power. And he does, speaking of the natural equality and unity that should characterise marriage. Later on, we see Jesus advocate for those who find themselves in another form of dependence: children, those who powerful adults can afford to marginalise.

In both confrontations, Jesus shifts the focus. He shifts the focus from 'what can a man get away with' to 'what did God intend'.

Yes, Moses allowed divorce but that was because of your hardness of heart! Divorce is a concession to the brokenness of the world. I think that Jesus leaves open the possibility that it is sometimes an appropriate response to that brokenness but highlights the danger that—like all things— it can be taken and used for the benefit of the powerful. In this case, for example, men could use divorce to leave their wives in destitution.

I often find myself making a similar mistake in other areas of life. When considering my financial giving I jump to 'what is the minimum I need to give this month' or when I remember having committed to pray for someone, I quickly send up a few words to pacify my guilt.

Living a life shaped by "what we can get away with" has an effect. We start to view others as an imposition, a threat to our freedom rather than gifts. The horizon of our lives closes. We lack a sense of overall purpose. We leave open space in which those with no regard for the rules can abuse the already vulnerable. And then in the wake of abuse, we wash our hands of structures we built. We did what we needed to do, didn't we?

But Jesus paints on a larger canvas. His discussion of marriage is followed immediately by a discussion about welcoming children. Jesus offers a vision for faithful marriages as part of a welcoming community.

In turn this community takes place in the context of God's action to which all our action is a response. So, to understand our response, we need to know to whom we are responding. The letter to Hebrews tells us that:

In these last days, [God] has spoken to us, by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

Jesus speaks as the one to whom the created order belongs and the one through whom all order was created.

In tasting death, he has brought many children to glory. He who has created a new family to whom we all belong. And he calls you brother. He calls you sister. And he calls this community his bride and he will never leave us.

To be married as Christians to be caught up in the faithfulness and hospitality of God. It is to witness to this God, and it is to offer Him and His welcome to others. That is because to be a Christian is to be caught up in the faithfulness and hospitality of God. To be a Christian is to witness to His character and offer these to others.

Each of our vocations are a variation on that one theme. Marriage is a particular way God joins disciples, but all disciples are joined to Jesus— and therefore, each other— by the Spirit. Marriage is a part that makes only makes sense in the wider whole.

And so, we receive marriage as a sign of the kingdom of God. And we receive it as if we were children. Not as something to be manipulated to our benefit. But as a gift, even its restraints, even its costs.

Jesus has inaugurated a new family. We gather this morning, drawn by the arms of Jesus, around the table as the unlikely adopted. Everyone is welcome. No power or advantage can earn our place here. Nothing and no one can stand between us and Jesus. So we may never stand between anyone and Jesus.

And as we go out, knowing our dependence and his blessing, we join in with the struggle against all that seeks to divide or marginalise, whether a distant King Herod or our own selfishness.

Where in our lives has the horizon of our vision reduced? In what relationships are we asking, 'what can I get away with?' or even, with others, asking 'what can we get away with?' and where might we start asking 'what does God intend'?

We ask 'what does God intend' not to reduce God to a rule keeper but to discover Him as a gift giver, as a kind Father, as one invested in our good.

This week, may you receive again, as a child, the good news that Jesus joined humanity so that we might join God.

May you know the Spirit at work, joining us together as those Jesus calls brothers and sisters, so that we might call one another brother, sister.

And may you trust that what God has joined no one will separate.

Amen.