

Trinity 17 B  
4<sup>th</sup> October 2009B  
Mark 10:2-16

I suspect that many pulpits will be silent on the issue of divorce this Sunday and instead choose to preach on the part about welcoming the children. Many in the Church who think we are unfaithful, point to this text as proof that Jesus says that divorce is not allowed.

But is it the case that the Anglican Church is disagreeing with Jesus? Perhaps not! Let's look at the Gospel; we have the Pharisees who ask Jesus about whether divorce is allowed. You know who the Pharisees represent, "Those who live by strict rules; black and white; what is good and what is evil are very clear, you just follow all the rules." Now we know all the Pharisees weren't like that, but in the Bible that is who the word "Pharisee" represents; those who think God is a divine policeman with a whole list of rules. Step out of line and you are zapped by lightning. We know through Jesus, that this is not what God is like at all. There is always a problem when people take Jesus' sayings as legal pronouncements. Perhaps Matthew is already heading in that direction, when he added the exception clause (5:31; 19:5) reflecting the common law, that a partner who committed adultery must be divorced. No forgiveness is possible. Joseph, for example, had no choice in that regard. Much of Jesus' energy in controversy with his fellow Jews was spent trying to show that we must interpret scripture in a way which sees its priority as concern for human well being: the Sabbath was made for people not people for the Sabbath. We are in the territory of appealing to creation and divine order also in the anecdote about marriage and divorce. One could reformulate: the order of marriage was made for people, not people for the order of marriage.

Paul had no difficulty contemplating that there could be circumstances where divorce might be appropriate almost in the same breath as citing Jesus' prohibition (1 Cor 7:10-16). The way Jesus interpreted scriptural law (which he upheld) ought to be a clue for us in how we interpret his. Would the primary concern we find in Jesus with human well being result sometimes in a decision which would override what he might have said about aspect of life at one time? Paul would certainly answer: yes. Paul was not trying to get around strict laws, but being realistic and caring.

How strange it is that in this Gospel, Jesus seems to become the Pharisee of Pharisees!!! He says that those who divorce and remarry are adulterers! Remember the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery." Serious stuff, if you think this is about Jesus making new rules. If you read this Gospel like a Pharisee!

Don't misunderstand; the text is clear; the God's hope for human marriage is life long commitment between two persons; God's intent for those who enter into marriage is that relationships develop so deeply that the marriage bond cannot be broken.

And yet, we know the reality of the human condition and of course Jesus knows it even better. We do fail! Let's be honest, about 1/3 of marriages in Australia end in divorce. It is a bit better for Christians but the numbers are not very good either.

We have become a society where divorce has become so accepted, that there is little sense of failure associated with it. Some even speak of our culture accepting "serial marriages". You marry a person and when they stop "meeting your needs" you get another, and so on. God forbid that we Christians would take our relationships so lightly. To become married, God

says is to become like family; one flesh. The intent of God's plan is permanence in married covenants. Marriage is intended as a reflection of God's permanent relationship with us. It says something about the state of Christian marriage these days that so few take it so seriously. The church even takes it less seriously. In the past, one had to prove to the church that their vows of Christian marriage were serious. They had to show that by being married they could better live out their baptismal vows. And in our Anglican Church, too often we condone the remarriage of people who show no sense of remorse or repentance over a past failed marriage.

And yet, Jesus knows that despite God's help, we do fail in our relationships and some marriages come to a point of being unrepairable; they become a mockery of God's intention to "be one flesh". And sometimes because of violence or unrepentant adultery in the relationship one person needs to end the relationship; the relationship again has become a mockery of God's intentions for married life. The truth is that often the reality of human sin and failure gets in the way of God's intent for us!

Today Jesus gives us a challenge to consider God's intent for our relationships; to not have an adulterous spirit and treat marriage as something that just comes and goes depending on our needs. But the life of Jesus tells us most clearly that God is a God of Grace, willing to give those who are truly sorry the opportunity to try again. It is in that Spirit; in a Jesus Spirit, that we do allow for the opportunity for those, whom others would condemn as unacceptable, to enter or re-enter into a covenant of marriage. And we have witnessed in these relationships God's intentions being fulfilled, where two persons have indeed become "One flesh".