

'For your hardness of heart...'
A sermon preached by the Dean
Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 7th October 2018.

At the time of Jesus there were two principal schools of Rabbinic thought, following two of the most significant figures in Israelite history: the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, both of whom were contemporaries of Jesus. Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai held significantly different opinions in the outworking of the Torah, the Law. Hillel, famous for his 'Golden Rule': 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah. The rest is the explanation. Go and learn', is held to have been the more generous interpreter of the law while Rabbi Shammai, inspiration for the school of Pharisaism was held to be stricter and more purist in his interpretation.

Many think that the question asked of Jesus by some Pharisees at the beginning of today's gospel reading is malicious, designed to trap him, but given the two distinct strands in interpretation of the Torah, and the crucial centrality of how to interpret Deuteronomy 24.1, the key text on divorce, the question to Jesus is a fair one. Given also that the answer to the question could mean life or death to women and children who could potentially face destitution and homelessness because of divorce, the question was and still is an urgent one for the most vulnerable in many societies where many women and children are at the mercy of husbands.

We're used in our culture not to have a particularly high regard for lawyers, supposing them (with apologies to any current or former lawyers present) to be primarily interested in winning and in fee levels, but the law matters. It is one of the pillars of a just and equitable society, which would collapse without the maintenance of law and order. Lives depend on good and balanced laws, and those interrogating Jesus would also have been in no doubt that God was involved in the giving and interpretation of the law. Seen positively, the law provided a framework within which families could thrive and negatively it still provides protection for the vulnerable against the powerful.

Jesus in his response however goes beyond law, way back to the intentions of the creator in creation: that we are meant for each other, that part of the natural process of growing up is to leave home and that for many this will involve finding the one with whom, we hope, we will make a new community based on love and trust. And, that, whether or not marriages and civil partnerships endure for life, it is always the desire of God for us that as we grow in stability and fidelity, we will remain together for life. The ending of an intentionally lifelong relationship may be for the best in a situation which has become toxic, but it could never be described as a successful outcome.

That is the context for Jesus' reference to 'hardness of heart'. Divorce is never ideal but if it is to be necessary he provides two remarkable signposts which would have astounded his hearers: the first is mutuality; it was considered acceptable for a man to divorce his wife and remarry, but not for a woman to remarry after divorce. She was condemned to a life of singleness and possible penury. Instead Jesus applies the same rigour to men as to women, laying down a standard of equality and reciprocity which would have been unthinkable at the time. The second signpost is vulnerability, demonstrated by the placing of the child within the sacred circle of

divine favour. The disciples have been perhaps disturbed by Jesus' teaching on divorce and question him further when they are alone together. His enacted parable is to rebuke the disciples for trying to prevent children having access to him, and instead to take them in his arms and bless them.

We need not to get carried away on a cloud of sentimentality here. Our contemporary culture is perhaps the first to centre itself so much around children. There are of course immensely positive aspects to this; the rights of children to be safe, secure, protected and able to flourish. The naming and punishment of abuse and campaigns against the exploitation of children are hallmarks of societies striving to become safer and more civilized, but the blend of both adulation of and pressure on our children is demonstrably also not doing them any good, as increasing rates of mental health issues among the young suggest.

In cultures such as first century Judea the importance of children was principally a matter of the future or hope and expectation. Yes, sons were a blessing, and daughters less so, but this was primarily in terms of the expectation of the adults they might grow up to be. High rates of infant mortality meant that parents could simply not afford, financially or emotionally to project all their hopes and aspirations on children who had a far lower statistical likelihood of making it to adulthood. So, whenever Jesus takes children in his arms and blesses them or takes a child and places it in the centre of the disciples, it is in recognition of the liminal status of the child. The child has no rights in that culture, is not listened to, is marginal and although yes, as other gospel stories indicate, loved, certainly not the be-all-and-end-all of its parents' existence. That is what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, and that is the context, or full stop on his teaching about divorce. It is about calling the powerful away from their hard heartedness, about teaching the Pharisees what underpins the Law and first and foremost about mercy, recognition, and due regard for those most marginalised and vulnerable in his contemporary culture.

I hope that this re-setting of the terms of the debate about divorce and remarriage in the Church today takes away at least some of the sting for any of you here today whose marriages may have ended in divorce and who may be feeling hurt or excluded by what sounds like the harsh and uncompromising tone of today's gospel. I think that the context of the reading is about how God deals with brokenness, which is, of course, the theme of the whole gospel, summed up in what Luther called 'The gospel is miniature, 'For God so loved the world...' For God loved the world in *this particular way*' that his beloved Son on the cross gathers up and bears on his heart of love all that is broken, so what we're talking about here is healing and reconciliation, not judgment and exclusion, and that cosmic and eternal context needs definitively to inform and frame the Church's welcome to all who come in need of the healing we can offer.

Amen