

On Sunday night past at our Confirmation service, Bishop George used the lectionary Gospel reading for the Day, but as the majority of the passage is on Divorce he agreed that it would not be appropriate to preach on that bit of the passage. He also suggested that due to my role as Chair of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council that I would be very best placed to teach on this. And so today using the same passage I could not resist. However it would be very easy to simply shy away from the difficult passages. And obviously today's reading brings challenges. What should we say on the topic of divorce?

If we simply look at statistics for the UK, the relationship organization Relate communicated a few years back that 42% of marriages now end in divorce, the rate of divorce generally increased during the 1980s and 90s, although since 2000 the percentage of divorces is falling a little. Also in 2013 120,000 families with dependent children had separated, and almost 25% of families in the UK are considered as lone parent families.

For me, I think these real statistics signify something of the broken society that we now live in. But when hurt occurs, when marriages break up, is that the end of life for people involved? In some cases I think yes it can have a major impact on children, while parents seem to close a chapter and move on. When issues exist in married life, is the answer too easy today to revert to divorce? Has the church dealt with the issue of divorce and marriage counseling in a sensitive way?

You know we can take a very hard line becoming judges very quickly, without showing grace. So how then do we deal with this very harsh sounding passage from the Gospel of Mark? Is condemnation the only interpretation, or do we dismiss it completely in today's society?

I think it's also important to state that I am coming from a family background where my mother and father separated when I was 16, so I've seen the issues firsthand. Our situation was that my Father was an alcoholic and began mentally abusing my mother for a number of years, and yet she felt it was not right in her Christian faith to divorce him, and the Catholic Church which my Father was a committed member of took a very stern view on divorce. So what is the answer?

In our text, Jesus voiced his profound concern for stable family life and for children. In Roman society, marriage had one purpose, to provide a legal heir who would inherit a man's property. In Jewish society, men could divorce their wives for any reason, but wives had no such right without their husband's consent. But in vv.10-12 of our Gospel reading, Jesus put women on an equal footing with men. Neither side was greater than the other when it came to commitment to each other. Divorce cannot be seen as an easy get out clause in order to marry someone else.

God had made the position clear in Malachi 2:16 that husbands should be protective to the future of his unity with his wife, and not so easily break such a covenant.

How is it that Jesus who seemed to frequently trouble the Pharisees by breaking many laws that they followed now takes the hard line when asked about the law of divorce? Jesus broke their Sabbath laws by healing people or picking grain on the Sabbath. He was the friend of sinners and went to their homes. Jesus knew that if he supported divorce the Pharisees would have him, and if he didn't support divorce Herod would have him. Caught between a rock and a hard place.

Jesus justifies his tough position against divorce and remarriage by an appeal to the creation story in Genesis, that God intends married people to stay together. God is on the side of unity, community, and togetherness. Our world would be a heartless, unstable place without the order and stability of people who show enduring commitment to one another "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, until death us do part."

Today's Gospel defends those who are victimized in marriage and divorce and defends little children. It is Jesus' response to a question that was put to him by his critics who were hoping to trip Jesus up. And what Jesus does is not to once-and-for-all condemn all divorced persons, but rather to come down clearly on the side of the weak, the vulnerable, and the defenseless. We live in a broken world where people make and break promises, where people find it difficult to keep their commitments, and where people have promises broken by other people. Jesus is clearly on the side of those who are hurt by such human chaos. The covenant that is formed in marriage is a binding, weighty obligation. That's why Proverbs 20:25 warns us that 'it is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later consider his vows'.

Jesus clearly affirms God's ideals for life together under covenant. But remember that the setting was a theological contest against the Pharisees – it wasn't a real pastoral situation. It was a discussion about what was lawful. It was not a response to a specific situation of pastoral care for real people. Jesus was responding to a theological trap set by the Pharisees, not to the anguished pain of someone actually going through divorce.

When the situation did involve a real pastoral issue, Jesus' response was different than with the Pharisees. You will know the story when Jesus spoke to a woman who had been divorced. How did Jesus respond to her and her situation? Did he communicate the Law? There were no words of shame or condemnation. Rather, He offered her eternal life, living water from which she would never thirst, and she ran off to tell everyone in the town about the man who was the Saviour of the world.

Jesus is not saying it is a good idea to have five failed marriages. But when faced with a real, live person who happened to have failed, He loved her and shared living water with her. He gave her such hope for new life that she couldn't wait to share the good news with her whole village. Folks it is obvious from the statistics today that failed marriages are a tragic part of society; yes, it is sad; it is heart breaking, but does Jesus sit in condemnation, or is he the one who above it all seeks to restore and heal a broken world.

On another occasion the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman taken in the act of adultery. Again it was a trap. But the woman is hauled before Jesus and thrown on the ground while the Pharisees stood around and pointed an accusing finger at her, waiting to see how Jesus will deal with it. Jesus is clearly against adultery, but in this setting of pastoral care, he says, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone". And he says to the woman, "Go and sin no more." He doesn't lower the bar, but he cares deeply for this one who failed. He gives her a second chance in life and sends her on her way. He recognises as he does today that this is a broken world, which he has come to restore, and he needs broken people to get back up and live a life that is aligned to God's ways.

When the situation is theological about what God's purposes and ideals are, Jesus speaks with clarity. When the situation is personal, involving real people, when people fail, we need to do like Jesus did. We need to love them, care for them, minister to them, and accept them. We need to join Jesus in helping people put their lives back together again.

In my own family situation I truly believe the one thing that I failed to do after my mother & I left home from dad, was to go back and pick him up. Mum was too bruised and maybe I was also, but there should have come a time when restoration would take place. The Marriage was obviously over, And I'm not in any way saying that it was my responsibility to fix it, but inevitably Davy Smyth's life didn't pick up at all after we left him. So do I and others sit back and condemn the mess that he made of his life and his marriage and his children and leave him to sort it out? Or like Jesus, do we get alongside and try to pick the person up, whatever mess they may have made of their lives.

God's desire for a man and a woman in marriage is unity for the rest of their lives. God never created divorce, man did, and for that reason Divorce is not part of God's will. However our broken world has formed deep cracks in relationships with each other. Therefore let each of us be full of grace as we get alongside those who have been in the middle of hurt and pain, and may we be careful in our judgment around issues that in today's broken world cannot be resolved so easily.