

*good news!*  
 a sermon preached on the  
*nineteenth sunday after Pentecost*  
 4 October 2015  
 at  
*st john's*  
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
 by *dr muriel porter*

the lections: Genesis 2: 18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10: 2-16

I would be surprised if there were anyone in the congregation today who had not been affected in some way by divorce. It might be you yourself who has been divorced, or your parents, a child or grandchild, or someone close to you in your wider family or among your friends.

So today's Gospel can be deeply troubling. No wonder most preachers confronted by this reading totally avoid Jesus' stark denunciation of divorce, and zoom ahead to the much safer ground of his warm welcome of little children! That is a pity, because there is actually great Good News in what Jesus said about divorce. And it is extremely sad that over the centuries the Church has either totally misunderstood that Good News, or has wilfully ignored it in its zeal to control people's private lives.

Divorce might be quite common in our contemporary society, but that is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was only in 1975 that 'no fault' divorce – that is, divorce solely on the grounds of irretrievable breakdown of the relationship – became possible in Australian law. Until then, people wanting to divorce usually had to resort to painful, demeaning and often expensive processes. Most people trapped in destructive marriages either had to put up with them, or separate without any hope of formalising a future relationship.

Both the Anglican and Catholic churches in particular showed little or no sympathy for people who needed to divorce. They had in the past campaigned strongly against government legislation allowing divorce for anything other than adultery, and flatly refused to remarry divorced people in church. Divorced women could not be members of the Mothers' Union. Divorced people in a congregation were often not quite acceptable, so not surprisingly, quite a few of them gave up church going altogether because they felt unwanted and ashamed. And divorced people never forgot the hurt of being rejected by their own church when they wanted to remarry – and nor did their families and friends.

Thankfully, in 1985, after years of fierce debate, the Anglican Church in Australia changed its rules to allow divorced people to remarry in church. One of the church leaders whose influence brought about that change was the late Archbishop Frank Woods of Melbourne. In Melbourne Synod, in 1973, he declared that he had changed his mind about divorce because of the pressing pastoral needs of the people whose lives were impacted by marriage breakdown. Why was marriage the only area of life where there could not be forgiveness for past failure, and the opportunity of a fresh start, he asked? Marriages could die, he said. He went further – he said he had decided that the matter was too pressing to wait until the national church got its act together. He would now permit Melbourne clergy to marry divorced persons in church – twelve years before church law caught up with his radical decision. It was an extraordinary act of courage and even defiance on his part so that people could be

ministered to in their need – akin to an Archbishop today declaring unilaterally that clergy could perform same-sex marriages in church if Australian law were to allow it!

Our church, in the main, now no longer discriminates against divorced people (though sadly, it still does in some parts of the country). Even so, Jesus' teaching against divorce can cause at the very least discomfort, and sometimes great distress to devout Christian people. It sounds harsh and uncompromising. But if there ever was a passage in Scripture where we must avoid a literal interpretation and instead seek to understand the context, it is here. We must try to understand why Jesus spoke about divorce in this way, and how his first listeners would have heard it.

In first century Judaism, divorce had become all too easy and very common. Easy for a man, that is. If his wife “spoiled a dish for him” – burnt the toast – or if “he found another more beautiful than she is”, he could simply write out a certificate of divorce and send her packing. She could be divorced if she was unable to conceive a child. Only a husband could initiate a divorce – the woman had no right to do so. Once divorced, she could not marry again unless her first husband gave his permission. She would have no respectable means of supporting herself, making her extremely vulnerable. Most divorced women would have had no alternative but to return in disgrace to her birth family.

The first century world was a patriarchal society where women had no rights, no status. Their marriages were arranged for them by their fathers, giving them little say in who they married. They could not be witnesses in a court of law, and in the Jerusalem Temple, they could go no further than the outer ‘court of the women’, segregated from the areas when Jewish men gathered. They could witness the temple rituals in the inner court only by glancing over the balcony of the court of the women. The Jewish man's daily prayer thanked God for not making him a Gentile, a slave or a woman!

In this world, Jesus proclaims something very radical indeed. Marriage is not to be treated in a cavalier fashion. Wives are not to be discarded over trivial matters, or because a more attractive woman comes on the scene. No, marriage is very serious indeed, for both the man and the woman. In marriage they become one flesh – they share a new oneness, not just in the physical sense but in every sense. They are a new creation. They have been joined in that creation by God. And men and women are equal partners in this new creation. This is the ideal of marriage he proclaims. Radical indeed in first century Palestine – and sadly, still quite radical in our world where the government has just had to commit \$100 million to programs designed to ensure women are treated equally, with respect, and given protection from violent husbands.

We need to understand that Jesus was not primarily condemning divorced people out of hand. No – in typical Middle Eastern hyperbole, to demolish the flagrantly selfish attitudes of his society which had abandoned a high view of marriage, he was emphasising that marriage is a serious business, to be respected, and that men and women have equal standing in that relationship. That is the Good News in today's Gospel. And it is Good News for men too, because where women are diminished, so too are men. When women are fully honoured, so are men.

And let us not overlook the second part of today's Gospel, about Jesus' loving acceptance of small children. It is not added to the divorce discussion by accident. It is there because it underlines further Jesus' radical reorientation of who is acceptable in God's eyes. Just as women enjoy full equality, so do children. They too are of account.

When the disciples spoke sternly to the mothers trying to bring their children to Jesus, they were merely reflecting the first century view that children were nobodies. They were, like their mothers, purely the property of their fathers, with absolutely no rights. They were extremely vulnerable. We are told that Jesus was

“indignant” with this view, and to demonstrate this dramatically, he took the children into his arms and blessed them.

He went one step further. He proclaimed little children as the models of those who would enter the kingdom of God, no less. So he showed that God’s kingdom was not for the powerful, the rich, or the important – but for those of no account, and for those who cast aside any power or importance to become themselves like little children, open to receive the kingdom which is ultimately the gift of God.

To return to divorce and remarriage: as Archbishop Frank Woods pointed out, marriages can die, despite the best efforts of the people concerned. And when they die, resurrection is possible. There is forgiveness available in this failure; a fresh start is possible. Broken people can be remade in new relationships blessed by God. That is a view close to the heart of Jesus, whose ministry of love always reached out to the broken-hearted. Thank God our church at last recognises that, and no longer inflicts further hurt on hurting people. Please God it will one day apply this same loving, pastoral principle to same-sex couples who earnestly seek God’s blessing on their relationships.

mporter@unimelb.edu.au