

Sermon by the Revd Sister Margaret Anne ASSP for the 10am Parish Eucharist at St Mary's Barnes on the 18th Sunday after Trinity 3 October 2021

When I first looked at our readings for today (Genesis 2.18-24 and Mark 10.2-16) I thought, "Oh, help!"... the Gospel is Jesus' teaching (according to Mark) on marriage and divorce – and that's an extremely sensitive pastoral issue if ever there was one, especially with such a high proportion of marriages ending in divorce these days. And also in the Church the whole sexuality debate has opened up and there are those who would like to see marriage extended to same-sex couples and not just the traditional one man/one woman model.

So, over these last few days I've been sorely tempted to ignore the readings and preach on something totally different; especially as I am vowed to a life of celibacy and therefore feel very unqualified to speak on marriage! However, I have decided in the end that to ignore the readings in this instance would be simply avoiding the issue. So here goes!

First, a general point. Jesus in our Gospel reading from Mark today is talking about an ideal; specifically about an ideal as regards human love. Love needs expression – and marriage (or some form of coupling of two people) is its commonest expression. Faithful, life-long Christian marriage between a man and a woman is a wonderful ideal to live by and can be an inspiring example to others of the potential of human love.

We all have ideals – maybe ideals about human love and the best and most appropriate ways in which that love finds expression; or other kinds of ideals – such as a truly just society, a world with no more wars, buying and consuming only food and drink that has been fairly traded, dealing decisively with the causes of climate change, or equality for all regardless of race, gender, religion, social grouping or sexuality.

It is natural and good that we each have at least some ideals to which we aspire. But of course we are all too human and frail and sometimes we simply fail to live up to our ideals. And that is part of being human. It's normal, and we don't need to be riddled with guilt and beat ourselves up about it. Yes, we have ideals, and equally, yes, being human, we don't always manage to achieve them.

In our first reading from Genesis the need for human love to find expression is set in the context of creation. God has created the world and all its creatures, and humankind is the peak, the high point, of that created order. The strange myth of a woman being formed from a man's rib might be seen to imply that woman is subordinate. We need to remember, however, that we are dealing with myth here and not logical reasoning. It's a bit like the story in the next chapter of Genesis of the serpent in the garden. If we get too literal in handling such symbolic stories, we will often miss the point. The story of the rib here symbolically suggests the closeness of man and woman in God's original ordering of creation and this closeness is highlighted at the end of the passage:

"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh".

Sexual union, spiritual union – ideally it's all one.

At the beginning of the passage God had observed, "It is not good that man should be alone". God recognises that the man needs a partner, an intimate companion.

I had another look the other day at the 1662 Book of Common Prayer Marriage Service. In it there are plainly given three main reasons for marriage, two positive and one negative. First (positive) for the procreation of children; secondly (negative) as a remedy against sexual desire leading to fornication, "sleeping around" as we would say these days; thirdly (positive) for companionship, that

is the “mutual society, help and comfort” of the couple “both in prosperity and adversity”, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it.

In Common Worship (the current liturgies that came out only 21 years ago), the Preface for the Marriage Service puts the Book of Common Prayer’s third reason first – the union of the couple. There is no negative reason and the Book of Common Prayer’s first reason for marriage (the procreation of children) is put second in Common Worship. It could well be argued that our modern marriage liturgy is closer to the ideal in Genesis, expressing the primary need for companionship. Here marriage is seen in essence as a partnership and many these days would wish to say as an equal partnership of loving and caring and sharing life together.

When we come to the Gospel reading, Jesus is being interrogated by the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day. They try to catch him out by putting him on the spot:

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

Jesus refuses to be bullied by such a blunt question and he responds, typically, with another question. And as so often, he takes the conversation deeper. Yes, Moses allowed for divorce. But Jesus also points them back to our earlier reading from Genesis. He points them to the ideal: faithful union, faithful partnership.

This is a painfully challenging passage for those who live with the reality of broken relationships. What is interesting about this passage, however, is that it ends with Jesus talking about children and the Kingdom of God. The disciples are always putting their foot in it. They try to keep children away from Jesus. Jesus rebukes the disciples and says, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs”. Then Jesus makes a remark that is really about adults, and for adults: “Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”.

In the first three Gospels especially the whole purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to proclaim the Kingdom of God; to open people’s eyes to God’s rule. And what is God’s rule? It is the law of love.

Like the Pharisees, we all too easily get caught up in rules and regulations; in do’s and don’ts. Is divorce right or is it wrong? Can gay people be treated as married couples or can’t they? We may well need to ask these questions. But perhaps we need to be cautious when it comes to supplying a rule book of all-too-ready-answers. God’s overriding law of love (to love God, oneself and one’s neighbour) is seamless. It is not subject to too many rules and regulations. For too many rules and regulations lead to judgement. God’s supreme law of love leads to forgiveness and openness, and requires the receptive and trusting attitude of a child.

Tomorrow is the feast day of that great medieval saint, St Francis. It might be rightly said that St Francis is the most popular Christian saint of all. And why is that? He had a great love of and closeness to creation. Did he not preach to the birds? He also had a great devotion to the sick and the poor and outcasts of society. One story goes that he miraculously healed a leper when washing him clean. But above all, Francis had a childlike simplicity of faith and trust in God. He was dedicated to a lifestyle of complete simplicity. In his life of dedicated poverty he knew that the only real rule in God’s kingdom is the law of love.

May we all, both in our human loving (whether we are single or in partnership) and in our love of God, seek to direct our lives to the selfless love that Francis displayed and which is the one true mark of the Kingdom.