

Homily for Pentecost 19, 2021

'Jesus on marriage'

Mark 10:2-16

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TEXT

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'³ He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'⁴ They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'⁵ But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.

⁶But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."⁷ "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,⁸ and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

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INTRODUCTION

Today we hear our Lord Jesus give us teaching on marriage.

As well as divorce,
remarriage,
adultery,
and children.

And,
as we approach our Lord's words to us here,
We need to acknowledge these are not light topics.

These are some of the most personal areas of our lives,
And for many people,
these can be some of the most painful areas of our lives.

The situations involved for us are often incredibly complex.

We are called today though,
not to focus first on the situations in our lives with all their complexity and messiness,

But we're called today together as the family of God,
to listen to what our Lord Jesus most wants to say when it comes to these topics.

Our Lord Jesus is full of compassion,
is kind and caring,
loves us and he wants only good things for us,

And,
He also gives us some very strong teaching in this area,
that he wants us to hear.

There are five points Jesus teaches us about marriage today,
so some of them we'll have to treat very briefly.

The challenge of marriage,
The design for marriage,
The protection of marriage,
the fruit of marriage,
and the fulfillment of marriage.

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THE CHALLENGE OF MARRIAGE

First, the challenge of marriage,
Or the challenge **to** marriage,
Which according to Jesus,

Is the ***hardness of human hearts***.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him (Jesus) they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'

Most likely the Pharisees are trying to place Jesus in their debates about what constitutes grounds for divorce,,
Who is Jesus going to side with?

Whichever way he goes,
he's going to get a whole lot of people off-side.

Jesus answered them, 'What did Moses command you?'

⁴*They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'*

They're alluding to Deuteronomy 24,
Where the issue of divorce is discussed.

But what Jesus does with this is so fascinating,

He doesn't get into a debate about the particulars of that passage,
But in an authoritative way he speaks to the reason Moses said what he said at all.

'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.'

But what does this mean exactly?

Well,

Jesus seems to be saying that what Moses wrote about in Deuteronomy was a *concession*.

A concession to a far-less-than-ideal reality.

Jesus is saying that because God's people are so often hard-hearted,

Which here is seen especially in how willing they were to dissolve and destroy their marriages,

Then Moses made this *provision* as a lesser-of-two-evils type thing,

He tried to bring some order and safety for people into a bad situation.

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Because of 'the hardness of your hearts'.

Hard-heartedness comes up a lot in the Bible.

Jesus has accused his own disciples of it three times in this Gospel up to this point.

It's a great Greek word by the way,

Literally:

Sklēro-kardia

Can you hear it?

'Sclerosis of the heart'.

This is a stubborn refusal to yield to God and his ways.

Have you ever tried to plant your garden,

When the soil has just turned rock hard?

Or maybe when you've literally hit rock.

This is God's task when he seeks to plant his life and his will for our lives into human hearts,
He meets with hardness.

Jesus says the willingness to so easily break-up marriages,

is one of the places you see this.

This is worth meditating on as Christian people as we think about marriage and divorce,
Even as we approach difficulties in our own marriages and try to work through them.

Because fundamentally, Jesus says,

Marriage breakdown isn't a problem of people falling out of love,
Or being seemingly incompatible,
or simply growing apart,

But fundamentally,
Jesus says it's that sinful condition of the 'sclerosis of the heart',
that is,
deep down,
the problem.

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GOD'S DESIGN OF MARRIAGE

That's the *challenge* to marriage,
What about the *design* of marriage?

This is where Jesus really wants to draw our attention.

*'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.
⁶But **from the beginning** of creation, "God made them male and female."*

Just notice this,
That for Jesus the way forward is sometimes to go back,
Back to the beginning.

Back to God's good design before human hard-heartedness messed it up.

Modern people always imagine the answers are off in the future,
And that the problem is people stuck in the past.

But Jesus wants to look forward,
By going back.

'...from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."

Jesus is saying,

Already there,
right at the beginning,
God is establishing marriage,
In his creation of male and female.

This is basic for Jesus,

That marriage is not ours to do with what we want,

Marriage is God's idea,
God's institution,
God's gift.

Then Jesus quotes the last verse we heard in our Old Testament reading,
about the bringing together of the first man and woman:

⁷“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh.”

Now Jesus focuses on what actually takes place when two specific people are married.

He says there's a mystery in marriage where something new is brought about,
A *'one flesh union'*.

Many times,
I've sat with a widow or widower,
And they've said to me,

*'You know pastor,
It feels like half of me is missing.'*

That's deep Biblical truth.

From God's point of view marriage is not simply a legal contract,
Although it is that.

Its not simply a good arrangement for society,
Although it is that too.

There is a far deeper and more powerful reality going on in marriage from God's point of view,

A *'one-flesh-ness'*.

And so much of the Bible's instruction about marriage flows from this basic truth.

So for example,
When later St Paul teaches husbands never to be harsh and cruel,
But instead calls them to a tender love in marriage which *'nourishes and cherishes'* his wife (Eph 5:28,29),

He's expanding on this truth of the one-flesh-ness of marriage.

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But then next,
Jesus connects the dots for us to make very clear and explicit what was implied in Genesis.

If God establishes marriage, making us male and female,

And if,
In marriage a new one-flesh-union happens,

Where's the real power coming from?

Who creates the one flesh union?

Jesus says,

⁹*Therefore what **God** has joined together...*

It's not just the *first* human beings who were brought together by God,

It's every marriage,

And this is quite radical,
And very good for us to hear.

Because this means that it's not primarily our love that joins us together,
It's not mainly our commitment,
or our strength,
or our legal system,
or our wider family connections and support,

Even though all of those are important and have their place.

But what's most important is the power and blessing of God that joins a man and a woman in marriage.

And this makes a practical difference then,

when you face difficulties in married life,

Which we all do,

Which both your pastors do,

Which even more,
both your pastors' wives do!

This means when times are tough you're not alone,

You don't have to get through it by your own strength.

God was there in the beginning to bring you together,
He'll be there right through to sustain your marriage.

Trust in him,
Rely on him,

Call on him for help,

Seek out his help in the life of the Church.

This is God's *design* for marriage.

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THE PROTECTION OF MARRIAGE

Then there's Jesus' *protection* of marriage.

All of this that we've just touched on,
This majestic vision of marriage that Jesus gives us,

This is what leads Jesus to give us his solemn warning against breaking it apart,

And his strong words cautioning against seeing remarriage as an automatic option.

Jesus says:

*⁹Therefore what **God** has joined together, let no one separate...'*

Jesus says:

'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Now again I acknowledge,
This can be hard to hear.

It was for the first disciples.

Immediately our minds jump to all sorts of particular situations.

And I could give you a whole long list of them which the Church has traditionally wrestled with as to how Christ's teaching applies in specific circumstances.

Jesus knows about all these.

But here his focus is not to delve into the particulars,

But to give us the norm,

To give us the pattern of his kingdom,

Which is,

*'...what **God** has joined together, let no one separate...'*

These words of Jesus are used in our marriage rite as the couple is declared to be married.

And I often tell couples how significant these words are.

They communicate to the couple *themselves* about the gravity of what they're entering into.

Christians aren't to enter into marriage thinking there's an easy out,
We're to enter into it assuming it's till death do us part.

But I also have fun telling couples that these words are not just to them but to everyone else there at their wedding,

to their friends,
to their parents!

I tell couples,
If there's a guy or gal out there in the congregation who still thinks they're in with a chance with the bride or groom,

Jesus words say:
*'You all out there,
Pursue this man or woman from now on,
knowing you will answer to God if you break them apart'.*

Perhaps the parents have had reservations about this relationship up to this point,
Perhaps they're justified?

But now they are being joined together by God,

Parents and family and friends aren't to meddle and undermine,

But to support, encourage, help.

*What God has joined together,
Let no human being separate.*

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Again, as I said,

I realise this raises all sorts of questions for people.

And please can I encourage you if you're unsettled by this,
either of your pastors are always very happy to sit down and talk about your situation,

we will always make time to do it.

I've also made available today the LCA's document on marriage, divorce and remarriage which can be helpful here.

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THE FRUIT OF MARRIAGE

But let's move on now to the next point,
Which is the fruit of marriage,

Or at least one fruit of marriage,
Which is *children*.

Did you notice how our reading has these two sections,

There's the teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage,

Then there's the section about welcoming children,
Bringing children to Jesus,
And welcoming God's kingdom like a child.

What's the connection?

As it happens,
Right before this text is also a discussion about children and little ones,
And being careful not to cause them to stumble.

It seems fair to say that one of connections which is implied here,

Is that God's design for children to flourish and be brought to Jesus,
Is that this flows from the loving one-flesh union of a man and woman.

And,
the destruction of marriages is going to be a hindrance to this.

This is fairly widely accepted,

That it's so often the children who bear a large portion of the consequences from marriage breakdown.

Again this can be hard to talk about,

Because we know there are many single parents and blended families who are doing their best to provide an environment in which children can do well,
And indeed be brought to the Lord Jesus.

But God's design,
God's pattern,

His will for us in his Kingdom,

Is that children are the fruit of the one flesh union of marriage which endures,
And that they are brought to Jesus to be blessed by him.

This is no small thing in a time when children are often now,

not seen as a blessing,

But as a threat.

Many young people are tempted to be afraid of having children because of the cost and all that it means to bring little ones into this world.

The Church needs to encourage people,

That it's God's good design,

That the one flesh union he brings about,

Is fruitful and bears children,

Who are brought to Jesus and blessed by him.

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THE FULFILLMENT OF MARRIAGE

So we've considered the challenge,
The design,
The protection,
And the fruit,

But finally,
There is the *fulfillment* of marriage.

What do I mean by this?

Well,
Earlier in the Gospel,
Jesus said something very mysterious one can easily miss.

He referred to *himself*,
As the bridegroom.

And this is the seed of the great vision St Paul later lays out,

Where the one-flesh union of marriage finally points to the great mystery of Christ joining himself to his bride the church.

He does this by loving the church and giving himself up for her.

Jesus Christ came to give his life *for you*:

To cleanse you,

To forgive you,
And to make you holy.

And this is for all who repent and believe,

For the single,
The married,
The divorced,
The remarried.

Christ's grace and forgiveness is for you,
And he can heal the brokenness in our families and lives.

Then,
as he rises again from the dead and sends us his Spirit,

He ushers his people into a new kingdom.

This is the massive implication of Jesus going back to the beginning of creation.

He's saying that those in Christ are now part of the new creation,

Where God's original design is being restored,
Where the concessions of Deuteronomy no longer apply.

Because although we're still sinners in this life,
in Christ's kingdom his followers are no longer **bound** in **captivity** to sin,
no longer **bound** to the hardness of their hearts,

In Christ, by his Spirit,
we are given new hearts!

Hearts which are open to hearing our Lord's will for our lives when it comes to marriage, divorce,
Remarriage, and children,

to live according to his good design.

And then in the Bible's final vision of the new heavens and new earth in the book of Revelation,

The holy city, the new Jerusalem,

Is 'as a bride adorned for her husband',
Who is the Lamb, Jesus Christ,
Who 'makes all things new'.

That's the fulfillment of marriage.

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CONCLUSION

There it is for today,

The challenge to marriage – the hardness of human hearts,

God's design for marriage – male and female in a one flesh union ,

God's protection of marriage – what God has joined together, let no human being separate,

The fruit of marriage – children and bringing them to the Lord,

And the fulfilment of marriage – where Christ joins us to himself and brings us into the renewal of his creation as he originally designed it.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.