

Sunday 6th October 2024. Trinity 19 BCP Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

Today's Gospel passage from Mark appears at first glance to be two unrelated stories, but there is a connection. Both stories tell us how Jesus cares for the outcasts and the less fortunate in society, as He cares for us when we too are made to feel an outcast, by those around us.

The first focus in this passage is women, particularly those who are divorced. In the first century Hebrew women were considered as property, and children were of no value until they were old enough to help around the home. Women could be divorced for reasons such as burning a meal, not keeping the house clean or for just getting older. As a result, if they did not have another male relative to support them, they usually ended up in poverty or prostitution.

In today's society divorce is painful and there might be some here today who have gone through it. It often hurts people other than the parties involved, siblings, parents, and friends. Speaking personally, I have recently been taken into confidence of a friend who is commencing divorce proceedings after his wife left him after twenty-five years together. His life has completely fallen apart, and he is even contemplating suicide. The people who are often the most vulnerable are the children who are caught in the disagreements and the fallout.

Jesus however is not seeking to judge people who are divorced, the Pharisees and religious folk were trying to trap him so what he speaks of is about God's desire for us to find wholeness not just in our relationships but in all things. Jesus expands on the difference between what God intends and human hard heartedness by illustrating the rights of a woman and a child. When He compares remarriage after divorce and committing adultery, we might

be struck by the severity of the judgement, but the real shock is that it applies to both husbands and wives, which was a very radical claim in first century Jewish culture. In Jewish law there was no provision for a wife to divorce her husband, but here Jesus places men and women on the same legal footing.

The bigger picture in Mark's Gospel is that it is about the mercy of God and so it follows here that one teaching on divorce leads to the calling of the children. Broken relationships and innocent children show us the vulnerability of humanity, and when Jesus embraces the children, he embraces all humanity and replaces its vulnerability with love and assurance. Jesus shows He comes to heal relationships, rather than establishing hopelessly high standards. He calls us to conduct ourselves in keeping with God's will, so we are a blessing to our families, our neighbours, and ourselves.

Jesus says we must receive the Kingdom like a child. Here the Greek translation is a little ambiguous; it could mean receiving the Kingdom as if you were a child, trusting completely in God's grace and offering our vulnerability to Him in faith, but it could also mean receiving the kingdom as you would receive a child - and contrary to Jewish tradition that placed no value on children, Jesus receives them with open arms and of equal value as the rest of humanity.

Which ever way the conclusion is this; trust and vulnerability form the foundation for receiving the Kingdom of God into our hearts and lives and should for all our relationships. In human terms that can be a precarious journey as so often we are hurt by others, by gossiping, bullying and lies that are said about us.

But with Jesus there is none of that, but to receive His abundant life we must give Him control, stop thinking we need to protect ourselves because He is our defence, stop taking responsibility for everything because Jesus is our provider. Like the children, we too must allow Him to embrace us in His love, care and provide for us in all things, and receive His blessing.

Whether you are single, married, divorced, in a relationship, whether child or adult, and especially if you are feeling human brokenness we are reminded today of God's gifts of healing, wholeness and unity and that each and every one of us are carried and sustained in His embrace.

Thanks be to God.