

St Peter's Anglican Church, Bundoora

20th Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday 06/10/2024

Reading Job 1:1; 2:1-10 / Ps 26 / Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 / Mark 10:2-16

(Readings are from New Revised Standard Version)

Sermon Theme:

By Rev'd Stephen Monsieigneur

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

¹ There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. ¹ One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ² The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' ³ The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' ⁴ Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵ But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' ⁶ The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.' ⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸ Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. ⁹ Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' ¹⁰ But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Ps 26

¹ Give judgement for me, O Lord,
for I have walked in my integrity:
I have trusted in the Lord and not wavered.
² Put me to the test, O Lord, and prove me:
try my mind and my heart.
³ For your steadfast love has been ever before my eyes:
and I have walked in your truth.
⁴ I have not sat with deceivers:
nor consorted with the hypocrites;
⁵ I hate the assembly of the wicked:
I will not sit with the ungodly.
⁶ I wash my hands in innocence, O Lord:
that I may go about your altar,
⁷ And lift up the voice of thanksgiving:
to tell of all your marvellous works.
⁸ Lord, I love the house of your habitation:
and the place where your glory dwells.

⁹ Do not sweep me away with sinners:
 nor my life with those that thirst for blood,
¹⁰ In whose hand is abomination:
 and their right hand is full of bribes.
¹¹ As for me, I walk in my integrity:
 O ransom me and be favourable toward me.
¹² My foot stands on an even path:
 I will bless the Lord in the great congregation.

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

¹ Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,
² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.
³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,
⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.
⁵ Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.
⁶ But someone has testified somewhere,
 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 or mortals, that you care for them?
⁷ You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
 you have crowned them with glory and honour,
⁸ subjecting all things under their feet.' Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them,
⁹ but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.
¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.
¹¹ For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,
¹² saying,
 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
 in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'

Mark 10:2-16

² 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. ⁶ But 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. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' ¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹ He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.' ¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But 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. ¹⁵ Truly 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.

SERMON

Divorce is a reality that is not a recent development in human society. It is also painful for all touched by it. We must note that while Deuteronomy¹ assumes divorce will occur and proscribes procedures for carrying it out, other scriptures do call the permissibility of divorce into question for example Malachi²; Genesis³. Unfortunately, many have been hurt by the application of binary approach to a matter that is anything but black and white.

Most of us will have had some exposure to divorce and I encourage anyone who finds they are struggling to please seek support; remember my door is open and there are other supports available.

At first glance the Gospel passage⁴ appears to be two unrelated stories, but there is a connection between the two of them. They express God's intention for and want of relationship with and for humanity and how this is best achieved through selfless humility.

Many are surprised to learn that divorce in the first century was a generally accepted part of life, both among Jews and perhaps more so within wider Greco-Roman culture; and that many upon hearing Jesus, probably found his uncompromising statements about divorce and remarriage as challenging as we do today.

There was debate regarding the detrimental cost of divorce on society, but for the most part people debated only details of its legal basis. For example, Shammai thought interprets Deuteronomy 24 to mean that a man may divorce his wife only in the case of adultery. Hillelian thinking interprets the same passage to mean that a man may divorce his wife for nearly any fault that he might find in her. Note the man is allowed

¹ 24:1-4

² 2:13-16

³ 2:24

⁴ Mark 10:2-16

to divorce his wife but not vice versa⁵. Jesus does not definitively answer yes or no to the permissibility of divorce.

The Pharisees determine the topic and question Jesus “to test” him. They want Jesus to commit to one side of this controversy, creating debate by alienating the other side. Jesus answers with a question challenging the premise of their position and so demonstrating how the Pharisees to have misunderstood scripture. More precisely, they misunderstanding of God’s design and resultant misuse of scripture and traditions to justify their errors⁶.

Jesus turns the conversation with the Pharisees away from the legal foundation for divorce to God’s design for marriage. That is, quoting Genesis⁷ Jesus dismisses the Deuterocanonical law⁸ as a concession to human weakness and offers a different perspective rooted in creation. Technically speaking, Jesus is not definitive but rather, *implies* that he disapproves of divorce. Whatever the view of Jesus is he is quite clear that divorce itself contravenes God’s plan as expressed in Genesis.

Jesus does not have a thing against the Mosaic law. But he is clear that the Pharisees have misunderstood and misapplied it. His reply to the question on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, reminds us,

1. how the law, like the legal debates among Jesus’ contemporaries (see 10:2), presupposes a man’s point of view.
2. The Pharisees were not fully transparent and neglected to mention a key requirement, whereby a husband gives a certificate of divorce to his ex-wife. Such a document might provide a divorced woman with a defense against rumour and slander.
3. The debate between Hillel thinking and Shammai thinking was of no interest to Jesus who refused being drawn into that debate, nor does he proceed by assuming a husband’s prerogatives in the matter.⁹
4. Jesus says nothing about the rejected partner and his or her remarriage. He seems to be speaking specifically against those who leave their partners for others. His point is that divorce does not offer a legal loophole to justify adultery. That is, his strongest words are against those who initiate divorce as a means to get something else, sacrificing a spouse to satisfy one’s desires or ambitions.

⁵ *Women are treated as their husbands’ property, and have few legal rights. The consequences of divorce for a wife are often devastating. Women have few options to support themselves. Some divorced wives can attract a suitor, but many cannot.*

⁶ (consider Mk 7:6-13)

⁷ 1:27; 2:24

⁸ Focussed on Deuteronomy 24:1-4

⁹ ¹Scholars are engaged in lively debates about the extent to which Jewish women in the first century could initiate divorce. Jesus may acknowledge this in 10:12, but ultimately solving the issue is not essential for interpreting this passage.

5. women are placed equally in the marriage relationship, hardly seeing them as passive objects. Firstly, the prohibition of 10:12, concerning women who divorce their husbands, parallels 10:11. (Matthew's Gospel confirms the scandalous nature of such a suggestion: it omits it! See Matthew 19:9.) Second, by speaking of a man committing adultery *against a woman* (and not against her father or her past or present husband), Jesus implies that adultery involves more than violating the property rights of another man. It concerns accountability to a partner, just as marriage does.

Marriage in the ancient world, at least among the vast majority of social strata, was primarily a means of ensuring families' economic stability and social privileges (by creating both offspring and inter-family alliances). A woman's sexuality was essentially the property of her father, then of her husband – a commodity.

The cultural differences between our society and that of the Gospels is significant and cannot be disregarded. Certainly today, at least in industrialized cultures, marriage has changed greatly, being less about economics and more about people seeking mutual fulfillment. And while divorce still often leads people (especially women) into financial hardship, divorced women today do not always find themselves doomed to the same social jeopardy many of their ancient counterparts faced. But these points do not render this passage irrelevant. Rather, the cultural and textual particularities cast light on the vulnerable whomever and wherever they are.

Jesus radicalizes the demands of scripture to a point perhaps far beyond where any Pharisee would have taken it. Divorce was not initiated within the law, but outside of it, for personal profit. This is not something that is unique to divorce. The breaking of any promise for selfish gain is in effect an abuse by discarding of another.

Children had very little status in Jesus' world. In that sense, they represent for us all people of marginal status (lepers, women, tax collectors) people whom Jesus favored.

Firstly they brought sick people so that Jesus might touch and heal them (3:10; 8:22). They had sought to touch even his clothing that they might be healed (5:28; 6:56). Now they bring children, not for healing, but for blessing. Who can guess what wonderful thing might happen to a child at the touch of a great man.

Having no status or power, children can contribute nothing to Jesus' movement. They are neither worthy opponents nor worthy disciples. Their playfulness can quickly turn disruptive. Who can tell when a child might cry or fight the parent's restraining grip? Better that children be kept in the background where they belong! The disciples speak sternly—Don't disturb the teacher! Shh!

Didn't they recall how so recently Jesus had taken a little child in his arms, saying, "Whoever receives one such little child in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, doesn't receive me, but him who sent me" (9:37) the disciples have missed the point.

Do we miss the point?

Divorce is painful. Being discarded as if seen as no longer of value is humiliating and embarrassing.

As Christians we are called to welcome especially others in need, others who cannot repay our generosity. We are called to receive the kingdom—as a gift. To bring nothing extra for security but come with empty hands and trusting hearts. To be totally dependent on God's grace, and that is the only way to receive God's kingdom.

Jesus' is clear, anyone who breaks an agreement, a promise made in faith with another for selfish gain is adulterous in their action and has sinned. Let us all be as children before God, that we may be taught, nourished and healed.

AMEN