

Today's gospel leaves many of us uncomfortable for one reason or another. It doesn't come across as good news. First, we have what sounds for all the world like Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce. That's enough to cause us to squirm if we have a divorce in our personal background or as part of our family history. It's uncomfortable as well for others of us who realise that our intact marriage does not make us better people than those whose marriages have collapsed; we too could have experienced divorce.

Jesus sounds demanding as well when he confronts his disciples over their efforts at crowd control. He doesn't want children to be kept from coming to him. However, the thought that runs through the mind of many a parent and grandparent is, "but should there not be some good behaviour and decorum?"

Jesus offers us children – in all their innocence, spontaneity, and even wildness – as a model for the kingdom he has come to proclaim. The entrance requirement for that kingdom is that we become like them: accepting, trusting, in the moment.

We who are adults may understand all too well what Jesus means about children and the kingdom, we may even admit that what he says rings true. But we look at our sad adult selves and realise that we are jaded, calculating, suspicious, and world-weary, hardly fit to pass through the portal; and this makes us sad and disappointed in ourselves, disappointed by life.

Today's gospel deals with these discomfiting matters, but the real centre of what Jesus says here lies somewhere else. It is to be found where he speaks about "hardness of heart."

Do you recall where that phrase appears? Jesus is explaining why the law of Moses recognises divorce: "because of your hardness of heart." The passage in question, found in the twenty-fourth chapter of Deuteronomy, doesn't legislate divorce, but simply admits that it takes place. It then legislates about certain cases involving remarriage of the same couple after their divorce. Jesus says that hardness of heart required this legislation. Then he raises the discussion to a higher plane by citing the establishment of marriage when humanity was brand new.

Hardness of heart is the problem. The big one. Not just for people who divorce or come close to doing so. It's a problem for all of us adults, whatever the state of our relationships. This hardness of heart can damage our most intimate relationships, and it gets played out in other areas of life as well.

Hardness of heart is what distinguishes us from the young children whom Jesus offers us as models for his kingdom. The heart in question here is not that beating organ in your chest, the subject of cardiology, nor the heart pictured on Valentine's cards, the emblem of romantic feeling. What is meant is the heart in the biblical sense: the core of human existence, what makes us who we truly are.

The hardening of this heart is the great danger in life. A hard heart is a lost opportunity, for God most readily works in the world through hearts truly alive. A heart that has become hard cannot be pure because it cannot pursue the purpose for which it exists. To the pure in heart Christ makes a tremendous promise: they shall see God. To miss the realisation of this promise is to miss everything. Yet all of us suffer from hardness of heart to one degree or another, and such hardening can happen without our awareness of it. The core of our existence hardens when we run scared, when forces such as pride and fear and hatred reign inside us.

Our hearts harden when we accept glittery substitutes, sensational idols, or even prosaic security in place of the authentic and challenging life God constantly offers us. Many forces in this world, including people and institutions, contribute to hearts becoming hard. The deadening of our core is often presented as something else: a toughening, a maturation. Sometimes it is even applauded. We take this internal deadness as a normal development rather than as a travesty.

Christianity claims that in response to this menace, God wants to replace stony hearts with hearts of flesh, hearts tender and alive. One place where the exchange is meant to happen is in worship. This is what we are about here and now. Public worship is an important part of Christianity's discipline for maintaining a heart that lives.

All this carries important implications for how congregations worship, for the messages communicated through liturgies, sermons, hymns, and sacred actions. Anything that passes for worship yet causes hearts to harden takes people in the wrong direction and must be rejected. But worship that fails to soften hearts and restore them to life is also seriously flawed. Attending church must not increase the deadness at people's centres nor leave them unchanged. What all of us need is nothing less than a new heart.

The Christian tradition refers to many reasons why people attend church, indicating how public worship is in truth a complex activity. These reasons include praising and thanking God, hearing the Scriptures and the sermon, praying for the needs of all people, participating in the Holy Communion, and engaging in fellowship with believers. All these reasons are important.

Yet the case they make for public worship may not be convincing to people who have not experienced such worship on a regular basis or have not found it engaging. To them these reasons may seem unrelated to their concerns and those of the world.

However, tradition offers this further reason for attending church that may make more sense and possess greater urgency: through participation in public worship, our hearts can be kept from becoming and remaining hard.

This reason for public worship may make sense to some people who do not appreciate the other reasons. These people recognise hardness of heart as a human problem. They wonder where a remedy lies. They believe, or want to believe, that our God can replace stony hearts with hearts able to love.

These people are standing on the doorstep of this Church. They are eager to find a fellowship where week by week those who participate welcome God's gift of a living heart. They await an invitation to enter, so that together with us they may experience through worship how hardness of heart need never have the last word.

Let us pray.

God of astounding mercy, make the heart of each of us like that of a little child, that we may welcome your kingdom with joy. Give us hearts of flesh, able to love with a love like your own. Through our worship continually transform us, that we may welcome others who desire your gift of a new heart. We ask this in the name of Jesus, and in the power of your life-giving Spirit.

Amen