

Year B - OS 27 - Gospel Mk 10.2-16- HTK 2021

Each Sunday the lessons at the Eucharist are set out in this booklet, known the Australian Lectionary. If you are not familiar with the lectionary, it is a scheduling of Scripture lessons for each Sunday of the year, moving in most churches on a three-year rotation. It is a powerful discipline for one to follow in preaching. It means that most preachers are dealing with the same passage of Scripture on a given Sunday. Each year is known as the Year of a particular gospel, this year being "Mark."

It also means that by following the lectionary the preacher cannot restrict his or her preaching to a few favourite places and passages in the Scriptures. This week, everyone preparing to preach is faced with a portion of the Gospel where Jesus, seemingly, has a very hard teaching on divorce. The reason for the qualification will hopefully become obvious as the sermon proceeds.

As you can appreciate there are some obvious problems with these words of Jesus being blandly presented in sermon. For it is likely that in every congregation there will be many who have been touched by divorce whether directly or indirectly. The challenge is that for many these words will be heard in an intensely personal way.

Depending as I suggested above whether it was parents, friends or even oneself who has experienced the trauma so often associated with a marriage break up.

All of this has the end result of hearing this passage as though it is addressed to particular individuals and feeling ashamed or angry or hurt or embarrassed, something of course that's totally understandable, especially if Jesus imagined these words being addressed to individuals.

But here's the thing I don't think he did.

Note how Mark sets up the scene some Pharisees came to test Jesus and said "is it lawful..." This isn't a casual or even intense conversation about love, marriage and divorce. It's a *test*. Moreover, it's not even a test about divorce but about the law.

Among the Pharisees. there were a whole lot of different perspectives about divorce. But Jesus was having none of it. He deflects their question away from matters of law and turns it instead to relationships and to God's hope that our relationships are more than legal matters but instead help us to have and share more abundant life.

Hence the turn to Genesis: questions of marriage and divorce he argues aren't simply matters of legal niceties but rather are about the creator's intention that we be in relationships of mutual dependence and health. In fact,

Jesus goes one step further and pushes those who are testing him to see that this law, indeed all law, was and is intended to protect the vulnerable. For when a woman was divorced in those days, she pretty well lost everything – status, reputation, economic security, everything. The law is meant to protect the vulnerable and hurting and every time we use it for another purpose, we are twisting it from the Creator's plan and indeed violating it, in the spirit, if not in word.

Jesus isn't speaking to individuals; he's making a statement about the kind of community we will be. In fact, he is inviting us to imagine communities centred in and on real relationships; relationships that are founded on love and mutual dependence, fostered by respect and dignity and pursued for the sake of the health of the community and the protection of the vulnerable.

So even though the discussion up to this point it's been about divorce, I don't think that's really the heart of what's going on here. Which is why I'm grateful the gospel reading includes the next verses describing the reaction of Jesus' disciples to those bringing children to Jesus to bless and more importantly Jesus' reaction to the same.

So, let's recall the context. Jesus has announced his intention to go to Jerusalem to die and in his response his disciples argue about who is the greatest. Jesus in turn tells him that to be great is to serve and that the very heart of the kingdom he proclaimed is about welcoming the vulnerable. In fact, he says that wherever you are welcome and honour a child- one who had the least status and power in the ancient world- you were welcoming and honouring Jesus. Now on the heels of this conversation about the purpose of the law some people bring their children to be blessed and the disciples try to keep them away.

But Jesus intervenes forcefully saying that welcoming the kingdom means welcoming children, that is the vulnerable those at risk and those in need. This whole passage I think is about community

And this is what the church was originally about- a place for all those who had been broken by life or rejected by the powerful who came to experience God through the crucified Jesus. As the one who met them precisely in their vulnerability not to make them impervious to harm but rather openness to the brokenness and need of those around them.

