

## Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

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

## Jesus Blesses Little Children

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

## Sermon – Sunday 3rd October 2021 - Trinity 18

**Introduction:** We have recently discovered that not all children buried in our churchyard have a specific grave; they were not considered important enough. In fact, it was common practice to bury children anywhere in a churchyard. In many third world countries children are valued less than in this country because a high mortality rate was expected. Often, there would not be enough food to sustain all the children born to a particular family. Consequently, some were simply left to die through starvation and neglect.

**The status of Children:** At the time of Jesus, Roman culture did not insist that a child even had a funeral. The status of children was the least in society. How shocking then for Jesus to insist that a little child, an infant, is brought into the centre of things. Not only that, but he also blessed the child and, what's more, said that unless one became like a child such as that they could not receive the kingdom of God. He was angry at the disciples preventing a child being brought to him. They were endeavouring to exercise their power of status over the infant.

So, Jesus is addressing the matter of status and power, much like he had when he insisted that the greatest of the disciples would be the one who was least and servant cum slave to the others.

An infant simply receives what he or she is given, good or bad. They are completely vulnerable, powerless and were of no cultural status in those days. They submit to whatever comes their way. How careful, therefore, we must be about such treasures entrusted to our care. A child abused or neglected will be psychologically harmed for life and those doing so will be harshly judged by God.

**The use of power in the Kingdom of God:** So Jesus insists that the power we are given, and any status we have, must not be used to exercise power or control over others but rather to serve them. Without such an attitude of humility and receptivity one cannot receive the things of the Kingdom of God: heavenly and spiritual gifts. Love does not insist on its own way or attempt to enforce one's will on others. We may wish to try, for the sake of something we feel is important, but we must resist the temptation, else we become corrupted. An attitude of counting others higher than oneself is

essential to Christian living and fruitfulness. “What can I do to help?”, perhaps, epitomises the way of servanthood.

**Submission:** The term submission has a bad press in our day because its historic context has been that of one person submitting to another and, thereby, encouraging a one way use of power, often men exercising it over women or those of higher status over those of lesser status. Yet, the concept of *mutual* submission is a strong theme in the teachings of Jesus and the Epistles. E.g. As St Paul wrote, ‘Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence to Christ.’ (*Ephesians 5:21*)

When we give ourselves to one another out of love then something new and beautiful is created. A union which enriches the givers. As Hydrogen and oxygen atoms die to their individuality for water to be created; as yellow and blue give way to their separateness for green to be formed; as coffee and chocolate become one for a Mocha to be formed, so the giving of ourselves to one other out of love brings about something of the Kingdom of God on earth. And it’s beautiful, sweet, glorious.

There is godly wisdom in mutual submission in contrast to the exercising of power over another. It is a beautiful thing, which is articulated in the marriage service: “All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you.”

**Today’s Excerpt on Marriage and Divorce:** This is the key to understanding Jesus’ teaching regarding marriage and divorce. He was addressing a strong imbalance of power between a husband and wife. He was speaking in a context in which the upper echelons of society used marriage and divorce as a means of political and social climbing, as evidenced by Herod’s marriage to Herodias. Also, a wife could be divorced on a whim by the husband because she was considered of little value – a chattel or servant to the husband with few rights of her own. Moses allowed divorce because, as Jesus put it, ‘..of your hardness of heart’.

In contrast, the bodily union, becoming ‘one flesh’ was meant to be a sacrament of a mutual giving out of selfless love for the other. This was to be the essence of marriage. So simply ditching one’s wife because one preferred someone else or had got tired of one’s wife was a breaking of the Christ-like concept of mutual love and submission – according to Jesus this is the essence of adultery. The fact that Jesus applies the term adultery to the husband as well as to the wife was quite a revolutionary statement since it put wives on an equal basis in marriage. It was a direct attack on the attitudes which blamed women for adultery and divorce.

One could argue that a marriage without mutual submission is not a marriage at all in God’s eyes. Any marriage relationship which is based on the abuse of power and control, is far from what God intended and ensues from hard-heartedness.

**Conclusion:** So, the message from today’s Gospel reading is clear: we must not try to impose our will on others or try to control or manipulate them, rather we must ‘Submit ourselves to one another in love out of reverence to Christ’, treating others as of special value, especially those of little or no power or status. In so doing, something divine, heavenly, will flourish in this place. May God give us grace to serve one another. Amen.

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