

Violence behind closed doors (Mark 10: 1-16)

Teaching about Divorce

10 He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

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."⁹ 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.'

Jesus Blesses Little Children

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.

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Jesus now turns to the question of the way in which social and economic power operates within the family. In insisting on the equal rights of women to divorce their husbands, he cuts at the roots of the patriarchal structure of his Jewish community. He then goes on to critique the powerlessness of children within the structure of the family unit. Importantly, it is the community *as a religious community* that he critiques. The alternative messianic community that he is building, we must remember, is characterised by non-violence. By looking at the actual power relations within families, he exposes and critiques the hidden violence present within families by focusing on the victims within those power relations.

Jesus and divorce: a critique of patriarchy (10: 1-12)

The stakes are extraordinarily high in this exchange with the Pharisees over the issue of divorce. In his previous encounter with the Pharisees, the issue had been Torah vs the tradition of the elders over washing. Here, it is a dispute over the Torah itself, and concerns the permissibility of divorce.

In one sense, it is straightforward: Moses permitted divorce. So where had the question come from? Was it currently an area of theological debate in scribal circles? Or had the question arisen because Jesus had been critiquing the practice? I think this is the more likely scenario, because of the way the action unfolds.

Jesus concedes the textual argument about the teaching of Torah. But then, remarkably, he goes on to cite the creation story in Genesis 1: 27-28. His point is that the Genesis story, rather than Torah, ought to determine how God views divorce. On what grounds does he argue this point?

Rather than look for instructional texts, Jesus makes his case on the grounds of what God intended for creation and human society “from the beginning”. For all the fact that Torah permits divorce, recognising the reality in the breakdown of relationships, Jesus’ contention is that something intended to be equally compassionate towards both parties to the divorce has been appropriated for male advantage, underpinning a patriarchal society that denies the fundamental equality of the sexes and therefore operating to undermine God’s intentions for human flourishing. Jesus’ concern, in other words, is with the *practice* of divorce in a patriarchal society.

Jewish society was patriarchal, and only a man could issue divorce proceedings. Any children remained in the man’s house. This left the woman alone, often viewed as “used goods” and without any economic support. Many became prostitutes as the only means of support - particularly in poor communities. The Pharisees ask for a legal ruling on divorce; Jesus looks at the social structure and the ways in which divorce tears both individual and communal life apart. This is the point of his “two becoming as one person”: this sort of interdependence is the God-intended foundation of community. Divorce is extraordinarily destructive, but more

fundamentally, is the expression of the “hard-heartedness” which is the foundation of community constructed on different priorities from God’s.

Women were not permitted to divorce their husbands. They were particularly and disproportionately vulnerable victims. This is the heart of Jesus’ critique of the patriarchal structures of society: his point is that if divorce is allowable because of human failure, it ought to be permissible for women as well. His response as a whole is a counter to the patriarchal argument from fallen creation that inequality between the sexes is God-ordained and ought to be maintained in faithful communities (Jewish and Christian).

Jesus later expands on his teaching with the disciples, in private – a familiar pattern. Shockingly, he tells them, a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against his first wife. This is to go beyond Jewish law, which recognized that a man could commit adultery only against another married man, *but not against his own wife!* In then going on to make the same point in relation to a woman divorcing her husband and then remarrying, he *contradicts* Jewish law, which stipulates that only men could initiate divorce.

Jesus “gets serious” about divorce in ways that go well beyond the way in which the Pharisees frame the question. “This is about human relationships”, he effectively says. “It’s about the foundations of human society. It’s not about keeping within the letter of the law; it’s about understanding God’s intentions for us, and the seriousness of broken relationships.” Jesus therefore ends up in a very different place from Torah observance: he permits divorce because of compassion – but insists that it applies equally to both men and women. Yet the same seriousness about human relationships means that he regards remarriage as adultery.

This is important in terms of how Jesus uses Scripture in ethical debate: for him, the power relationships within society that make victims out of the most vulnerable mean that we cannot read God’s instructions about how we ought to live without looking at that particular context. It is possible to deploy God’s commandments in

order to perpetuate a society that is radically and disobediently at odds with the world as God intends it. In other words, it is possible to order society in ways that are apparently “scriptural”, but which run directly counter to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus and children: the “least of the least”

The next incident concerns children. Whether Mark links these two because he is following a “family pattern (ie parents followed by children) or because children were inevitably always victims of divorce because of being the most vulnerable family members, we ought to see Jesus as critiquing family structures, rather than behaving like church people do over children: “Awwwww how sweet!”

Jesus is not idealising childhood. In these two incidents, he looks at the family as a social unit and foundation stone of the wider community. He is critiquing the destructive ways in which power operates within families against the weakest members. If the Kingdom is “for the least first”, children were “the least of the least”. They were regarded as possessions to be used as needed: they could be sold as slaves, used sexually or simply disposed of. Jesus is making the point that they “live by the grace of others”, helplessly subject to their whims and desires. Receiving the Kingdom “like a little child” thus means recognizing that it comes as pure gift and blessing, and receiving it joyfully as something that saves.

This is the passage that speaks most directly to situations of child abuse. Most child abuse has its roots within the family. Predators who gain access to children most commonly do so because of their connections with the child’s family. It is also tragically commonplace that families will cover up abuse and collude in the cover up by priests, teachers and other members of “respectable institutions”, as mountains of victims’ testimony affirms.

The significance of what happens in the family is the way in which it plays out within society at large. What makes abuse so terrible is that it is a form of violence in which the victims are predisposed to repeat the same pattern of behaviour – but not

against their perpetrators. So abused children grow up to become abusive parents; children subject to violence become dangerously violent teens and adults. Those who tend to repress these violent reactions express the damage in substance abuse, addictions and mental illnesses.

It is in this regard that we must read Jesus' actions of embrace and blessing. This is to reconstruct the place and value of children in the family structure. Embrace carries overtones of acceptance, protection, comfort, healing and love. Jesus the powerful adult does not threaten or hold fear for the children. They are literally safe in his hands. Blessing expresses God's own yearnings to pour out blessing and flourishing on the world. When family relationships are transformed in the ways Jesus envisions and enacts, the Kingdom of God will have drawn very near indeed.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 10: 1-16)

Mark next turns to a setting where issues of justice and power are most often overlooked: marriage and divorce. The Pharisees engage Jesus in an argument not about the morality of divorce but about what constitutes the legal grounds for a man to dismiss his wife (10:22). It can hardly be accidental that Jesus follows this debate with another illustration about children, who are always the victims when parents divorce (10:13-16). For a second time in this section, Jesus brings children into the centre of attention, but is here rebuked by his disciples (10:13). This provokes his indignation and he solemnly vows that what is at stake is nothing less than the "keys to the kingdom"

Among the marginalised today, children still are the most vulnerable. They are the first victims of poverty, disease, displacement, war and social disintegration. Above all, children are victimized by the breakdown of the family. This is why Jesus demands that they be embraced without qualification. To respond to the children in our midst, calls us to deal with the vicious inter-generational cycles of violence and create the possibility for a transformed future for us and for our children.

If the epidemic of sexual and physical abuse now becoming publicly visible is any indication, the roots of violence in our family system run deep. We are learning about the terrible price that is paid by those who are abused and by families who often deny that abuse has occurred. Alice Miller has outlined the "silent drama" of abuse. It begins with the child's experience of being hurt and violated without anyone knowing it. The child cannot deal emotionally with that hurt, so he or she internalises a sense of betrayal.

Christy Swanson, in "Breaking the Power of the Lie: An Ethic of Just Regard for the Adult Survivor," provides us with some important clues about the healing process based upon her own experience. It is a process that includes 1) truth-telling, 2) confrontation with the abuser, 3) repentance of the abuser, and 4) forgiveness and reconciliation.

Swanson says that most survivors of sexual abuse must deal with continuing denial. The ultimate healing of the wound of sexual abuse is thus found in the restoration of a sense of justice in self and relationships. The healing of survivors begins with the painful memory of what has been repressed and denied within themselves. This most often necessitates the help of a skilled and caring therapist. When memory is restored, survivors face the choice about whom to tell, given the reality of ongoing family relationships. It is very important that the silence that conceals the crime be broken and, in many cases, the abuser confronted with the truth.

But no requirement for confrontation should be placed on survivors. The survivor must answer the question: Based on my own need for healing, whom do I need to tell? Forgiveness and reconciliation are possible only where there is no denial and only after true repentance has taken place. "Forgiveness" that is offered an abuser who remains in denial is "cheap grace." Those who seek to support survivors must reject this. If the truth is acknowledged and true repentance comes about, however, reconciliation can happen if and when survivors are ready and willing to resume the relationship. But Swanson makes it clear that the healing of survivors is not

dependent on anyone else's repentance. Survivors can make a commitment to the truth as a cornerstone of their relationship, no matter what others decide to do. Living out the truth becomes the way of loving.

Swanson calls on the church to provide accompaniment for survivors as they take steps along this spiritual path to healing. Support will be needed by survivors as they move through the stages of grief, as they learn to trust again in spite of profound betrayal, and as they continue to deal with the reality of denial and the brokenness of family. The church best offers support for the spiritual formation of survivors by its belief in the liberating power of the truth. In all our actions we must give testimony to a God who listens to the grief and rage of survivors. The church can work toward healing by being willing to grieve and rage alongside survivors, knowing that their grief and anger hold the promise of new life.

Mark's gospel holds a vision of society, church, and family that is based on access and acceptance. To become like a child is to acknowledge the place and condition of the most vulnerable ones in our midst—our children. To be in compassionate solidarity with children is to confront the roots of violence in our society. This includes speaking out against the patriarchal mind-set that promotes male privilege and legitimises an abuse of power, which often leads to violence against women and children. To construct a truly non-violent life, we must weed out the structures and practices of violence at their roots in the most basic levels of human community. As parents, families, or communities of faith, we must re-dedicate ourselves to the struggle to convey God's blessing of children, so that children may have the life that they deserve.

All age worship ideas (Mark 10: 1-16)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above

all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Reflections

Down by the Jordan where John the Baptist got into bother for attacking Herod over his relationship with his brother's wife, a similar trap is set for Jesus over the issue of marital relationships.

Cunningly Jesus take his challengers right back to the beginning to remind them of where relationships started – where men and women were created co-equal and in the image of God. Relationships were not male dominated as they had become and not in any way abusive. Humans in God's image were created to be in faithful, loving relationships – a reflection of the loving relationship that God establishes through Jesus.

Jesus doesn't sidestep the law of Moses but seems to recognize it as Moses making the best of a difficult situation in the face of human frailty and infidelity.

The first part of this passage could be seen as a lesson on faithfulness and equality – not treating marriage as a disposable commodity – but along with the second part it still brings home the emphasis of the kingdom in restoring value and status to those who have none, namely children and women in controlled or abusive relationships.

Children are particularly vulnerable and need to be welcomed and protected but in their vulnerability they can also teach us. They love, trust and depend upon their parents or those who care for them. We too need to see life in the kingdom as loving, trusting and depending upon the faithfulness of God who remains faithful to the relationship he makes possible in Jesus. It is this relationship that then informs all other relationships.

Ideas

We don't often preach on safeguarding yet to be fully appreciated by the whole body of Christ as represented in each congregation it ought to be celebrated, rather

than simply acknowledged, and affirmed in the context of our worship.

The Mark text here could refer either to children or those young in the faith or the most vulnerable. Beginning with children simply highlights the importance of creating a community of safety which reflects the values of the kingdom of God and acts as a model for the respect we should be constantly and consistently showing to one another

Have copies of your church safeguarding policy scattered around the church. You don't need to read through it but remind everyone why it is there and why it is important. It is not simply a practical document but a declaration on our part that we take the concerns of God whose kingdom belongs to the 'little ones' seriously.

Invite a conversation for how we can help to work together in making our gatherings and activities places of safety and affirmation for the most vulnerable.

Create a Safeguarding quiz – use social media examples so that young people can participate. There are great resources in helping young and old to see both the dangers of the internet but how it can also be a great tool for encouraging, educating and making life-affirming connections.

Get to think about ways in which adults can help children and children help one another to avoid cyber bullying or getting caught up with unscrupulous people on the internet. Above all avoid making it an administrative exercise, make it a celebration.

Celebrate children and young people – and get everyone to think about how you can invest better in that part of the church's ministry

Celebrate equality and faithfulness in relationships – again reflect on how the church can be a place of support to couples and families but also an example of positive and gracious living together. Think also of how it can be a place of loving guidance and

long-term healing for those who have had difficult experiences.

Prayer ideas

Celebrate gender – in your prayers of praise and thanksgiving focus on the character and nature of God in whose image we are made male and female

Intercessions should be sensitive – Pray for ways that may have been identified where the church can offer relationship support and example.

Pray for anyone who is still recovering from the consequences of abuse. Be alert for any pastoral support that may need to be given.

Pray for your safeguarding policy and for the responsibility of the whole church.

If words seem difficult then perhaps play some quiet music and have trays of tea lights – invite people to either light a candle for someone they know or for a situation they are aware of; or light one for themselves as a sign of their own commitment to walking with Jesus who brings light into the darkest places.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 10: 1-16)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

What a difficult text to use for a service. For me the text is about disagreement and how God's ways are sometimes different from the world's, so here are some resources that reflect that theme:

Prayer for Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God,
your ascended Son has sent us into the world
to preach the good news of your kingdom:

inspire us with your Spirit
and fill our hearts with the fire of your love,
that all who hear your Word
may be drawn to you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray for the breaking in of God's kingdom in our world today.
Lord God, because Jesus has taught us to trust you in all things, we hold to his word
and share his plea:

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where nations budget for war while Christ says, "Put [away] your sword":

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where countries waste food and covet fashion while Christ says, "I was hungry . . . I
was thirsty . . .":

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where powerful governments claim their policies are heaven blessed while Scripture
states that God helps the powerless:

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where Christians seek the kingdom in the shape of their own church as if Christ
came to build and not to break barriers:

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where our prayers falter, our faith weakens, our light grows dim:

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Where Jesus Christ calls us:

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us. Open our ears to hear it, our hands to serve it, our hearts to hold it. This we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

<https://www.thykingdomcome.global/resources/10>

A prayer that unusually uses congregational responses at the beginning

For those deprived of their human needs

and their human rights,
that they may be given the dignity
which God confers on all his people;
We pray to the Lord

For all who are forgotten or thrown away,

and especially for the poor, the sick and the aged,
that God might change our hearts
and move us to love them as the image of Christ
We pray to the Lord

For all who are lonely or afraid,

for teenagers on the street,
old people in nursing homes,
prisoners with no one to visit them,
and all whom the world has forgotten:
that Christ might lead us to them;
We pray to the Lord

For all who are forgotten or cast off,

that we might value each human life,
as a priceless gift from God;
We pray to the Lord

Amen.

(Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

O God,
Who created us out of love?
We pray for all who are losing hope.
Help us to understand what it is like
To be poor or marginalised,
Or exhausted by the sheer struggle to survive.
Fire our imaginations,
And enliven us to work for the relief
Of their suffering;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Angela Ashwin,
"The Book of a Thousand Prayers", 2002

God of Justice,
Have mercy on those who sleep on the streets or in hostels,
On the floor or on a sofa,
In store rooms or offices,
And those who know that their friends' hospitality
Is at breaking point.
Help us to build a fairer society,
Where having no home does not exclude anyone
From work and health and respect.
Help us to build a society where all may 'dwell in safety'.
In the name of the homeless Saviour, Jesus.

Amen.

(A Prayer of the month from "The Well at Willen Community")

O Lord,
Open my eyes that I may see the need of others,
Open my ears that I may hear their cries,

Open my heart so they need not be without succour;
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak
Because of the anger of the strong,
Nor afraid to defend the poor
Because of the anger of the rich.
Use me to bring love and hope and faith where it is needed
And so open my eyes and my ears
That I may this coming day
Be able to do some work of peace for you.

Amen

Alan Paton

For those deprived of their human needs
And their human rights,
That they may be given the dignity
Which God confers on all his people?
We pray to the Lord

For all who are forgotten or thrown away,
And especially for the poor, the sick and the aged,
That God might change our hearts
And move us to love them as the image of Christ
We pray to the Lord

For all who are lonely or afraid,
For teenagers on the street,
Old people in nursing homes,
Prisoners with no one to visit them,
And all whom the world has forgotten:
That Christ might lead us to them;
We pray to the Lord

For all who are forgotten or cast off,
That we might value each human life,
As a priceless gift from God;
We pray to the Lord
Amen.

A Commission and Sending Forth that is perfect for an ending to worship.

Cease to do evil, learn to do well
Search for justice, help the homeless,
The poor, the hungry, the elderly,
The lonely, the imprisoned.
May the love of God enfold us?
And the fire of the Spirit inspire us,
And may the blessing of the Loving God
Come down upon us and remain with us always.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

<https://re-worship.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/call-to-worship-mark-9-33-37.html>