

06/10/2024      Mark 10:2-16

Let's say a couple called John and Jane get married  
Here at Bethlehem.

When it comes to the declaration of marriage

The pastor will proclaim these words from

The Rite of Marriage of the Lutheran Church of Australia:

***Since John and Jane have promised themselves to each other before God and in the presence of us all, I, as a servant of God and by the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia, declare them to be husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no-one separate.***

Those last words:

**What God has joined together, let no one separate.**

But where do they come from? And what do they mean?

Well, those words come from the mouth of Jesus himself,

And today I'm proclaiming good news from God's word:

It is *God* who brings husband and wife together in marriage,

And who can be relied upon to keep husbands and wives

Faithful to each other, even through the storms of life.

More than this, Jesus' own teaching reveals to us

His faithfulness to his bride, the church; to us:

He will not send us away, but remain faithful to us

And bring us home to share life with the Father.

Let's hear how today's reading begins: **Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'**

All the evidence is that divorce was widely accepted

In the Jewish society of Jesus' time.

The Pharisees evidently had arguments amongst themselves

About what were the sufficient grounds for divorce –

Some were more strict in their thinking, others less so-

But they test Jesus out by asking Jesus simply whether its lawful,

Full stop, for a man to divorce his wife.

Notice the detail, by the way:

For a *man* to divorce his wife,

Not for a wife to divorce her husband.

They are coming with a particular mindset,

Evidently seeing things from the man's point of view only.

Jesus is going to get them to see things

Not just from the woman's point of view as well,

From *God's* point of view.

This is how the narrative goes on: **[Jesus] answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’**

Now, the only mention of divorce in the Torah,

In the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible,

Is the fifth book, in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Here’s how it reads: **Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.**

OK. That’s it. It’s evidently what the Pharisees have in mind.

Now listen to the narrative unfolds: **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.**

This hardness of heart is a stubborn refusal to yield to God,

And, Jesus is saying, Moses gave the legislation in Deuteronomy

Because of the reality of this hardness of heart,

Rather than the reality that God established in creation.

Jesus, in his teaching, goes back to the first book of the Torah,

To Genesis, and to the creation accounts in the first two chapters.

There we read, and Jesus quotes authoritatively,

That God made them male and female –

That sexual differentiation is God’s idea –

And that the one flesh union of a man and his wife

Is also God’s idea,

So that we could say that the communion of love

Between a husband and a wife is a sign pointing

To God’s ultimate purpose in creating humanity in his image:

Showing the unity of non-interchangeable persons in one love.

It’s after this that Jesus adds his own authoritative word: **Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’**

Listen again: **What God has joined together.**

We need to receive these words, because we are tempted to think

That marriages are held together by *human* strength:

By the strength of emotion and feelings of romantic love,

Or the by the strength of commitment and doing one's duty.

Now, although feelings of love and commitment to one's partner

And desirable and even necessary parts of marriage,

*They make for a poor foundation,*

Whereas God's word is a rock to build on

So that marriages can stand the storms that come.

It's a bit like this: a Christian husband and wife

When they look at each other can know on the basis of Jesus' word

That God means them to be together,

That God *is* holding them together.

If they are tempted to keep the marriage together by works,

By what they can summon up in feelings or commitment,

Then they are on shaky ground – a reliance on works

Starts with pride and ends in despair.

I'll say that again, – a reliance on works

Starts with pride and ends in despair.

But when a couple trust

That it is God who has brought them together,

And that God will supply their need

In the very real trials of married life,

Then they experience the power of the resurrection –

That God can give life even to the dead,

That Jesus' response to the Pharisees

Is also a word to his own disciples, for us, is clear

From what happens next: **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.'**

This is in-house teaching for Jesus' disciples; for us.

It's not a word for husbands only – it is not male centred,

But also for wives: it is seeing marriage from *God's* viewpoint.

That this teaching is important to the life of the church

Is also shown by the way the apostles handed it on,

So, listen to this teaching from St Paul to Christian couples:

**To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain**

**unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.** 1 Corinthians 7

We who confess Christ know that it is God  
Who joins husband and wife in a one flesh union for life.  
This is the teaching from the Lord and his apostles.  
Of course, in the tangle of life we work out what this means for us  
As we, in humility, acknowledge our own weaknesses,  
And as we deal gently with others facing the storms of life.  
We are together not because we are good enough for God,  
But because the Lord Jesus has called us.  
He is the one true bridegroom,  
Who will not send us away in our need,  
But give us his consolation as we confess our sins,  
And trust in his saving love.

In fact, this reality is brought out by what happens next.

**Listen: 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.**

Notice how Jesus’ teaching on the union of husband and wife,  
And his teaching on the welcoming of children  
Are brought together in the Gospels.  
Jesus has already given his disciples teaching  
On welcoming children, but they don’t understand.  
In fact, their refusal to allow children to come to Jesus  
Earns them an indignant response from their master.  
It is especially children, who have nothing to offer  
And everything to receive,  
It is especially children to whom the kingdom of God belongs.  
More than this, our Lord assures, us  
That we can ourselves only enter the kingdom where God reigns  
As we come to God with nothing to offer,  
But with everything to receive, even the blessing of Christ himself.  
So, let’s today receive his word in childlike trust,  
And live in the blessing that comes  
From his gracious presence with us,  
And from trusting in his word, rather than our strength.  
In Jesus’ name. Amen.