

Hymns: 342 All hail the power of Jesus name
6 Father we love you
736 In heavenly love abiding
712 put peace into each other's hands
313 Thine be the glory

Readings: Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12
Psalm 8 (801)
Mark 10.2-16

'Becoming like a child'

Holy God, break your word among us for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you sight o Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus said, 'whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

Friends, I want to enter the kingdom of God. I have no other purpose – and we have none other in all the life of our church.

One of the great challenges of the lectionary is that it requires of preachers a discipline to address those texts of the Holy Scriptures which they'd rather avoid.

And none more so than today's words from the Gospel.

For, whereas the second part of today's Gospel, dealing with Jesus' blessing of children, warms our hearts, his hard words earlier about divorce are a challenge to us all.

And, as is the case so often when public questions are asked with heavy agendas attached, in this case by the pharisees – but also with this kind of public self righteousness today, what is going on is only about divorce and marriage on the surface – it is about that, of course, but is also about power. Coming as it does on the heels of John the Baptist's cruel murder

for criticising the remarriage of Herod Antipas, the Pharisees are setting Jesus up.

Will he fall into the trap of criticising Herod Antipas for his marriage to his brother's wife, as John the Baptist did, leading to his arrest and murder?

But, conversely, this is also the beauty of the lectionary...

We're challenged to hear the Gospel in all its fullness, and to grapple with the word that frees us. Because it does free us – from cynicism, from judging, giving us new eyes with which to look in humility at our world and to know the love of GOD.

And I want nothing more than to come into the kingdom of God with a soft heart – not to be hard hearted, world weary - but to become like the child as Jesus has commanded us. We must resist the demon cynicism with all our might!

So, today, the words and the works of Jesus...

Jesus says: What God has joined together, let no one separate

At first reading these words of Jesus are strict in the extreme.

As he goes on to say, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Harsh words indeed.

And, according to a first reading of Jesus, this rigid understanding of what's sometimes called the sanctity of marriage is reinforced by the creation story from Genesis – "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

Now, when I'm preparing couple for their wedding we use as a basis for our discussions the marriage service as contained in the modern service books of the church, such as the *Methodist Worship Book*.

But the modern service doesn't contain many of the elements which some folk still wish to have – the bride in white (no such special colour for the bridegroom) entering the church on the arm of her father who is (what's the phrase?) to *give her away*; one wedding ring (not two) to be placed upon the woman's finger by the man; and a great declaration about the couple being *Man and Wife* (note that, not husband and wife), with the woman then leaving the church on the arm of another man (her husband).

This beautiful ceremony, beloved of many, based upon that of the *Book of Common Prayer* (the common heritage of Anglicans and Methodists) expresses, in reality (once we strip away the beauty of language and ritual) ideas and concepts which we probably don't love.

For example, whereas the woman enters as a bride and leaves as a wife, the man remains what he's always been, a man.

The woman is handed over from one man to another, as a possession, shown by the one wedding ring (it's a relatively recent phenomenon for men to wear wedding rings).

The whole ceremony speaks of women as possessions.

Now, don't worry – if you love these traditions and you are coming here to get married I won't force you to give them up – it is your wedding, not mine. God preserve us from so much stiff purity that we lose the fun, the twinkle in our eye.

And in two recent weddings here, we had the beauty of both groom and bride presented to each other by their parents.

There is space for our cultural preferences - Whatever our views on this – I prefer the couple walking in together, or perhaps each on the arm of a parent, and two rings not one, and a proclamation that they are now a married couple...

The whole symbolism of white seems (especially when only worn by one of the two), seems, if we're honest, most odd.

Marriage is an excellent way of life, among other ways of life- for those of us called to it. And this does not mean we are incomplete if unmarried, nor that it is the only way of life. And we want more joy in it, less heartbreak out of it.

But I am always careful when I'm tempted to defend a particular culture of 'traditional' marriage, because not only did Jesus not defend traditional marriage of his day, he overturned it in one!

Indeed, in his day the woman clearly *was* a possession.

And if your possession, like some washing-machine or electric kettle, was faulty or no longer pleased you, you always had the guarantee.

A wife could be dismissed by her husband with a certificate of dismissal, just like that – not that she had a similar right over her husband.

And, whereas another man who was found to be unfaithful with another man's wife was said to have committed adultery against the husband of the woman, if her husband had been unfaithful with a woman not married to anyone else, whilst he may be regarded as naughty and a fornicator, he had not committed adultery, for the other woman had no husband.

We need to understand this when we quote, if we do, Jesus' prohibition of divorce, for the whole divorce system in Jesus' day was stacked against women.

Women who were regarded as being the property of men – remember the commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

See how the Ten Commandments are, first of all, all about men (not women), and see how a man's wife is worth more than slaves and cattle, but less than his house.

Be wary of anyone who, with uncritical eyes, talks about a biblical view of marriage. In scripture there are many forms of marriages and relationships, many ways of beginning them and dissolving them, and

they are not all good. Some of them do great harm. And remember, as my husband reminded us last time he was here in this pulpit, asking 'what would Jesus do' leaves open the option of throwing over the tables in the Temple.

So, what Jesus is doing here, far from making the Law harder for women (and men) is to speak of the heart of marriage, a heart which is found, not in men possessing women as property, but way further back in the creation story – significantly, before the Fall – when Adam (the Hebrew word for humankind), when humankind is created equal in dignity and worth, "in the image of God."

Actually, it's hard to argue that the Gospel forbids divorce.

Certainly the Church has changed her views over centuries.

Even St Matthew, writing a few years after St Mark, develops these, apparently, harsh words of Jesus.

Listen to St Matthew's version – "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery."

And St Paul speaks of marriages which may end when one partner is a Christian and the other isn't.

So, these harsh words of Jesus, and the example he uses from the story of Adam and Eve becoming "one flesh," are actually harsh not in the way those who advocate some moral absolutes for marriage and divorce would have us believe.

They're not there to condemn those whose marriages, for whatever sad reason, end.

And they certainly cannot be used, without being taken out of context, to condemn any marriage of equals, or equal marriage.

Rather, they challenge us to take seriously that first marriage of Adam and Eve in the Garden, where two people were joined together.

When God said, "It is not good that the man," it is not good that humankind, "should be alone."

And to regard this as the pattern for all our social engagements between people, all made in the image of God, all worthy of respect, all capable of being hurt as well as loved, and, should an ending come, all worthy of respect.

And it's a pattern for all social relationships, not just marriage, but all our attempts and all our delights at human community – from brothers and sisters in a religious community of monks and nuns, to the relationships we have with our children and parents, our colleagues, our friends, our neighbours, our lovers or companions.

For they challenge us all, whatever our marital status, whether we're single or married, divorced or separated, widowed or abandoned, gay or straight or whatever, to treat all people with the dignity and worth with which Christ treated and treats all.

Be aware here, Jesus is asking more of us, not less, in relation to each other and our society. More, not less.

We are always against heartbreak, and some patterns of relationship bring heartbreak – we know that and we try to step away from them.

Some patterns of relationship do great harm – where they exploit a partner, or abuse, or treat anyone like a doormat – which is quite different from loving each other sacrificially – as mutual servants.

And with Jesus, we are always against hard heartedness – even when we may need to take a stand that is deeply unpopular with our local culture, as for instance, John the Baptist had done with the marriage of Herod to his brother's wife Herodias – remember what happened to him with the head on the platter back in Mark 6.

This is, surely, what Jesus – the one who came to set us free from the Law, who told us that it's all summed up in a commandment to love, the one who the apostle to the Hebrews calls God's last word – this is surely

what's there behind and shining through Jesus' apparently harsh words, "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

And thus we come to the second of the harsh words of Jesus...

Jesus says: Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs

Here we see Jesus in all his inclusiveness.

A Jesus who appeals to our natural sense of openness and welcome.

A Jesus whom we hear, being a welcoming church, a Jesus whom we hear reinforcing our own standards.

All are welcome in this place, as many love to sing.

Jesus' words and works also provide the pattern for our many acts of blessing – not only those of children and infants in baptism, but also all those marriages and other unions and commitments which we have the privilege to bless in the name of God and of the Christ of God.

However, remember, before we find these words easier than the first, note the challenge – to welcome little children is to welcome those who will challenge and disturb. And not just tolerate, but welcome.

You will remember the words said of Jesus I think first by Shaun Claiborne and American preacher, that he came not just to comfort the disturbed, but to disturb the comfortable?

It means that the innocence of children is to be our innocence.

The dependence of children to be our dependence.

The love of children for the parent whose only emotion towards her child, towards his child, is love is similarly to pattern our lives.

This is the approach Jesus has to all those who come to him.

To little children (which may, in fact, also be a reference to the first disciples, new in their faith)...

To anyone divorced unfairly, abandoned or abused in a relationship where they should have been protected.

To divorced people today, full of a whole range of emotions – ranging from regret to relief.

To those damaged and abused by others, whose testimony is doubted and who remained scared and scarred.

To older folk, no longer children, but still wish simply to follow Jesus.

To some of us who are bewildered by the pace of social change, and deeply critical of some of it and don't know how to engage it.

To all of us, whatever our state, wherever we are, in whatever condition.

Blessing is such a wonderful and life-enhancing thing.

In Hebrew and Jewish thinking, to bless *is* to give thanks for, and to offer something is to be thankful for that thing as a gift.

Not for nothing do many churches say at the Offertory, *All things come from thee, O Lord, and of thine own do we give thee.*

It's as if a divine and human drama or dance is happening every time the faithful give thanks, every time we seek God's blessing, every time we bless.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, we say – yet how can we bless God, unless we're in that community of love and thanksgiving?

At the Last Supper, according to St Mark, "Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, he broke it," whereas according to St Paul, "Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it," yet to bless bread is to be thankful for it, and to bring thanksgiving to God for a gift is to acknowledge that gift as a blessing from God.

To bless any thing is to give thanks for that thing, and to offer it to God as God's gift, God's blessing, to us.

How fitting that we should hear these words of Jesus – words about community and union and love, words about blessing and thanksgiving, at

Holy Communion, at the Supper of the Lord, at the Eucharist (at *the* Thanksgiving) when we offer, give thanks for, and bless bread and wine, and God gives back in joyful offering and thanks the body and blood of Christ, our food and our drink.

How fitting for those who follow a Jesus whose arms are outstretched towards us, even as our arms are outstretched to world.

"And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands upon them, & blessed them."

So Lord may it ever be with us – may we become as the child, to live with one another and come into the kingdom of God.
