

What is lawful?

Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Mark 10:2-16

Over the years of my ministry I have spent some time being with couples who have found their relationships going through a difficult patch. It's not something that people find easy to talk about or acknowledge. Usually it makes most of us feel uncomfortable, whether because we have lived through divorce, or whether we have lived through the divorce of others – parents, children, or friends. Inevitably people become defensive, evasive, embarrassed, or emotional when the topic of divorce comes up.

Divorce rates have gone up in recent years, in the UK it is estimated that around 45% will end in divorce, in the US it is 50%.

When any relationships come to an end, marriage and others, the impact is far greater than most realise. Not just the couple involved, but children, other family members, friends, work colleagues, and on and on the ripples go out. It is a further tear in the already shredding fabric of society.

“Marriage begins with promises meant to be kept. On the day of the wedding most couples truly intend to keep their vows. However, the following years will bring times and seasons when a couple's life together may feel more like hell than a match made in heaven, and sometimes promises are broken.”¹

I've often wondered where all the love goes. All the hope. All the expectation. All the brightness. Lost in a thousand little infidelities; a thousand little conversations not had; a thousand little incompatibilities not worked through. Major things go wrong, but it is more often than not the steady erosion of respect, trust, the desire to cherish and appreciate that is at the foundation of most divorces.

This text from Mark's gospel bristles with difficulties. But before the fundamentalists rush to a definitive answer about what Jesus says about divorce, we need to look at the context. What is

surrounding this story and this time in Jesus' life? Who are the people involved? Then we might get an idea about what Jesus wants us to think about and grapple with in this hard saying.

Jesus has a growing following and more and more people are attracted to His radical teaching. The religious authorities were taking more and more interest, and it may be that some of them thought that it was time to put this untrained rabbi back in His place. As soon as they asked, "Is it lawful", Jesus knew He was going to be challenged by what the Scriptures taught and how He understood it. It was a matter of constant debate amongst Jewish religious leaders. Some said that adultery and only adultery was the ground for divorce; others took a more liberal view and said it could be almost any grievance, including the burning of food. Anyone needing to rush home and turn the oven down in case the roast is cremated today?

Jesus throws a question back: "What does the Law of Moses command you on divorce?" In fact Scripture says very little. The only mention of it is about remarrying someone you already divorced. It seems the Scripture took divorce for granted. Even Jesus seems to take divorce for granted. But to imagine a question that says, 'what does the Bible say about divorce?' is the wrong question to ask because the Bible says different things: for Moses it was allowable, for Paul it was allowable in certain circumstances, Ezra says it is necessary if you have married a foreign wife, and Jesus says it is not. The Bible has no single answer to the question; that's why it was so hotly debated.

But what if Jesus is looking at a bigger question, with an even harder answer? These verses interrupt a longer discussion written around the images of children and other 'little ones' – the poor, the vulnerable, the voiceless and powerless. In Jesus time, for a woman to be divorced was a devastating social and economic catastrophe. Who would look after her, or her children if there were any? If you add that on to what Jesus goes on to say about those who mistreat children. The most vulnerable in any society, Jesus calls for children, representative of all the

vulnerable, to be brought to Him and blessed by Him, and more challengingly says that to such, the voiceless, the powerless, the insignificant, the downtrodden, the rejected, to such belongs the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God. The question is not about divorce and remarriage, it is about what God wants in God's relationships between humans, and between God and God's people. What does God value in relationships, and therefore, what do we?

In our culture when fewer people get married at all, or get married later in life, where some half of the couples who do get married eventually get divorced, and where parenthood does not need the institution of marriage, these words of Jesus might seem outrageously outdated or simply irrelevant. The point remains that people still get married, or enter into different kinds of relationships, or have to engage with the vulnerable and the needy and the dependent.

That's what I believe is underneath what Jesus is saying. So what is He saying to our time? What is your judgement?

What is it that we hope for in any relationship? What do we value, and how do we square that with what we believe God creates things to be? When there has been divorce and remarriage, there should at least be the recognition that harm has been done to all involved.ⁱⁱ There should at least be a learning of lessons, and see where issues lay on both sides, whatever the proportions may be. But that applies also to the fall-out between friends; or between colleagues at work. Dare I say it even applies between countries at war, or the economic forces that sweep across our nation and the nations of the world, or the Volkswagen car emission scandal?

Fundamentally, we live in a relational world. For relations to flourish, emerge, develop, there must be trust, delight, respect, honesty. What does God want in our relationships? God does not want us to live in relationships that involve affairs, or abuse, physical or emotional. God does not want us to live in countries where the bond of trust and protection between government and people has broken down and become brutal and authoritarian, with freedoms

denied, and basic needs ignored. God does not want multinational companies to sell us products based on deceit.

We are not first century Jews dealing with first century Jewish concerns about divorce and remarriage. But the principles underlying what Jesus teaches have broader implications. Jesus' intention is not to condemn or be moralistic. He intends to reorient, exhort and empower each one of us to look at all the relationships in our lives and see whether or they measure up to God's challenging but desirable standards for what is best, and right, and lawful in God's eyes. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God is not about what is permissible but what is ethical. It is not simply about the laws of God, but finally about the grace of God.

Maybe if we were to accept the grace of God, trusting, faithful, loving, then our world might indeed be a better place. Maybe if we recognized that in any relationship God's presence is a given, then we might find joy enhanced and hope given in sorrow. All relationships need work, personal, work, within the community, international. All relationships have issues: some flourish, some fail, some can be redeemed. What Jesus hints at here is God's radical faithfulness, and that nothing will divorce us from God's love for us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, *Feasting on the Gospels – Mark*, p296

ⁱⁱ Richard Stern, *Feasting on the Gospels – Mark*, p299