

Trinity XIX

Gen.2:18-24; Ephesians 5:25-end; Mk.10:2-16

Divorce and Remarriage.

So last week, some very foolish vicar stood here and said, in uncompromising tones, that if Jesus of Nazareth said something that rather settled the argument. You might not like what he said, you might find it awkward and difficult. But that doesn't matter. Jesus wasn't giving you propositions to discuss. He was giving you commandments to obey.

As everyone was leaving church last week, someone who – and I'm very impressed by this – had looked ahead to the readings for this week, said he was looking forward to seeing how I got out of this one.

Because this is *really* uncomfortable isn't it. No divorce, apparently for any reason. Moses – who Christians sometimes like to think was stern and conservative and legalistic – Moses had left a loophole. You can get divorced, sometimes. Jesus seems to close it down. No, nay, never. And if you get divorced, and then marry again, that's adultery. End of.

If that's true, several of you are in adulterous relationships right now.

If that's true, then around a quarter of the marriages I have blessed here at St. Lawrence are in fact, adulterous.

And if that's true then it is hard to imagine a vicar getting it more wrong than I did, when I told someone that the sooner they got a divorce the better.

How to get out of this one?

The first thing to say is that that is really, really difficult to do in twelve minutes. This is something we need to think and debate about a lot more deeply. Really, someone should write a book about it ... and as it happens, someone has. Me! *Joy* is available from all good bookshops for £12.99. If I sign your copy, you'll get more for it on Ebay. And it has a very good chapter on marriage and divorce. And because I am a lovely vicar, we have actually printed out copies of the relevant bit and left them at the back for any who want to think about this more closely. (*copy available at the end of this sermon*)

The second thing to say is that divorce and remarriage should indeed trouble us. If you are worried about how widespread and casual divorce and remarriage have become, you are not some fuddy-duddy, old, out-of-touch, unsympathetic moral bigot. At least, not necessarily. We have become way too complacent. It sometimes seems as if men in particular think it is fine to walk away from their families when it all becomes a bit like hard work. They'd rather be free, with their mates, with a new, uncomplicated, younger woman. And the rest of society is expected not to be judgemental. Well, maybe more judgement is required. Maybe those men should be made to realise in no uncertain terms that they have behaved appallingly. And part of that, maybe, would be the Church saying actually, no, when you come for this new relationship to be blessed, to have your big wedding – no. That was a wrong thing you did, abandoning your family, and it will not be blessed in God's house.

Because Jesus really was quite fierce on the matter. So the two big question for us are: why was that? And what makes us think we have any leeway today?

Why was Jesus so fierce against divorce? Two reasons, I think.

Number one: his context. Some Jews of Jesus' day said you could get divorced for almost *any* reason. If your wife (and incidentally, it was the man who made all the decisions here) displeased you for any reason – didn't look good anymore, nagged you too much, didn't cook right – you could divorce her. She was property: if you don't want her anymore, throw her away - like rubbish. And no need to worry about divorce settlements: you kept the lot. Rubbish doesn't need maintenance. Divorce, in Jesus' day, was often simply an expression of the male power to treat women like rubbish. And in that context, Jesus says simply: no. Never.

Number two: what marriage means. Marriage, Jesus says, is not acquiring a piece of property. Marriage is when two lives are fused together at such a deep level that it almost doesn't make sense to speak of two lives any more: it is *one flesh*. One great mystery of love. That, Jesus says, is how God made marriage in the first place. It's not just a human arrangement, to be torn up at our convenience. It is something designed by God.

And St. Paul, in the New Testament reading today, ponders that design and sees that it points towards something even bigger and deeper: the way in which God gives himself to the world in Jesus. In Jesus, it almost doesn't make sense to speak of God and the world any more: they come together in one great mystery of love. Us and God, bound forever. Come what may: for better, for worse.

Every sermon I have ever preached about how God never, ever gives up on us.

About how his love and mercy are there even in our darkest, most miserable failure.

About he will never, ever abandon us.

Every one of them depends on this: God *marrying us* in Jesus. The Cross is God's wedding vow: this is my body, given for you. Given totally, utterly, without reserve and forever.

That, the Bible says, is what marriage is about. And that's why you can't get divorced. God doesn't divorce us, how can we divorce each other?

Well, firstly, we're not God. God is capable of loving and enduring and forgiving in a way which we are simply *not*. His love is bigger and stronger and deeper than ours. And to say that we should love in just the way He does makes good sense as a moral ideal, but rather less as wise counsel. We're not as strong as He is. Of course, we should *try* to be like Him. Of course we should *try* not to give up on each other, not to abandon each other. But equally, this side of the Kingdom, we need to be realistic about our prospects. We might simply get to the point where we are not able to do what we're meant to do. No doubt, we sometimes think we are there too quickly, we give up too soon. We need to try harder to make our marriages work. But to say that point of final failure is never reached is mad. Failing is what being sinners in a sinful world means. Sometimes human marriages fail. They die, in a way that the mystery they point towards never does.

Actually, even Jesus says that. Mark's version of what Jesus said needs to be heard alongside what he says in Matthew. Twice in Matthew Jesus talks about divorce, and on both occasions he repeats what we've already heard – but then he adds, *except in the case of porneia*. Except in the case of porneia. It's a little unclear what porneia means: it might mean full blown intercourse with someone who is not your spouse, it might mean some broader notion of sexual immorality. But whatever it means, according to Jesus it can end a marriage. Well, marriages are either unbreakable, or they're not. And Jesus says here very clearly that they're not.

Now, the only circumstance he allows that in is *porneia*, something sexual. And this is where, I think, if we're going to be sensible, we need to go beyond the strict letter of Scripture. I mentioned at the beginning that recently I told someone – someone far from here, by the way, so don't panic!- that the sooner they got divorced, the better. Now, that person's husband hasn't, as far as I know, committed adultery. He is, however, a complete Grade One nasty piece of work. He has bullied, intimidated, harassed, and used violence against his wife repeatedly. He has wrecked her life, and their children. Now *maybe* there has been no porneia. But you know what? A one night-drunken fumble outside the marriage would have infinitely less destructive and wicked than what has in fact been done. It isn't just porneia that wrecks marriage. And if Jesus can see that porneia might end a marriage, couldn't he also see that other things could too?

I hope so. I cannot know so, but I hope so. And that's why many, many Christians are prepared to push beyond what Jesus actually said, to what we think he meant. Remember, he was so fiercely against divorce because in his day, it meant treating people like rubbish. But what if in some desperate circumstances that's what *marriage* means? Would Jesus, faced with the human wreckage in the situation I have just described, have told that woman to stay, to be reconciled to the abuser? I don't think so. I think He would have told her to run, fast and far. I think he'd have told his church to look after her. And I think he would then turn to her abuser, to do justice.

And if, in a while, that woman finds a new man, who builds her back up again, who is able to heal some of the wounds, who can love her like God loves, and who can give her a new start? If she and her children are really finally safe, and healing, and looking to the future? If all that happens, and she has learnt to trust and love so much again that she comes to church and asks for a wedding, can I really think that Jesus would refuse to ring the bells and crack out the Cana wine? I really can't. I think that would be a glorious Kingdom moment. I think Jesus would rejoice. Her old, abusive, deadly marriage is dead. Her husband's sin killed it. But new life is beginning. Resurrection. That's what He is about, and He would bless it.

And if that's true for her, with her unique story, it can be true for many with theirs. It can be true for you.

To Jesus, who loves us more than we can love each other, who binds up all our wounds, and who gives us new life: to him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Peter Waddell

Extract from 'Joy: The Meaning of the Sacraments' – Chapter on Marriage

by Peter Waddell

...It is striking how many opponents of same-sex marriage have reconciled themselves with remarkable ease to the practice of divorce and remarriage. This acceptance represents at least a comparable degree of change in the institution and theology of marriage. Admittedly, Roman Catholicism has never accepted remarriage after divorce, whilst that the Orthodox have always allowed it in certain circumstances – the teaching of both churches remaining therefore quite unchanged. For others, though, the change has been dramatic. In 1938, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England was forced to abdicate because he wished to marry a divorcee. Today the next Supreme Governor has already married a divorcee, and had this marriage liturgically blessed.ⁱ The number of church weddings involving one or more divorcees is rising year on year in the Church of England and many other reformed churches. It is increasingly considered rather unusual and unattractively strict for clergy in these churches to refuse to preside over such services.

This is truly remarkable. Jesus was very clear: 'they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.... whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery against him.' (Mk.10:8-12). Divorce then seems not only wrong, but in a sense *impossible*: you might leave your spouse, even obtain a legal divorce, but at the most real level of all you would still be married. If these words are taken at face value, marriages are quite simply indissoluble. As C.S. Lewis once wrote in a related context: 'the truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured.'ⁱⁱ (A problem lurks in these words to which we will return).

How then can Christians justify remarriage after divorce? The question is actually whether Christians can believe in divorce as a spiritual reality and not merely a legal fiction: whether marriages can truly die, spiritually speaking. If so, then it follows the parties are no longer married, and equally that there is no reason why they cannot marry again. There might be sensible pastoral grounds for suggesting to individuals that to do so unwise. But those individuals would now be unmarried, and hence in principle free to marry again.

The Roman Catholic Church, like many Christians beyond it, thinks that Christians are not free to follow this reasoning. Rome acknowledges divorce as a reality in civil law, but believes that those who have undergone this process nonetheless remain married in God's eyes. Hence they cannot marry again, and those who do (in civil ceremonies) are officially barred from receiving the eucharist unless they commit to living in chastity. It is a controversial and hard policy, with the usual Roman merits of tough-minded consistency and refusal to accommodate to prevailing cultural mores. Christians who disagree must be very careful lest they end in collaborating with sin. Divorce damages people, especially children, and is resorted to far too often and far too quickly in our culture. The church must be deeply wary of doing anything which seems to normalise it or trivialise its cost.

All that said, there remain good reasons for thinking that divorce and remarriage might be a legitimate Christian option. First, remember the particular context into which Jesus' stern prohibition was uttered. He was addressing a culture where not only was divorce easy, but its effect was devastating. According to some schools of Jewish law, men could divorce women in first century Israel pretty much at whim: lightly, casually. And when they did, those women were left destitute and pathetically vulnerable. When Jesus outlawed divorce, what he was doing was saying to men: 'you can't treat women like rubbish.' And so his prohibition on divorce belongs naturally within his ministry of joy – the inauguration of a Kingdom where no-one would be treated like rubbish.

What then would he have said here, now? It is at least plausible that he would have opposed divorces where people were treated like rubbish, and marriages where people are treated like rubbish. It is at least plausible he would acknowledge that sometimes it is precisely divorce which allows people to stand up straight and claim their dignity. Some marriages crush people, and arguably what joy would do is set them free. So it is not obvious that in being true to the letter of Jesus' saying we are true to the spirit in which he said it.

That might sound like tendentious evasion of the plain sense of Jesus' words. However, that 'plain sense' is in need of careful examination. *Contra* Mark, there is actually some ambiguity about Jesus' teaching. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, he allows that adultery might end a marriage, and that the innocent party in such a situation is free to marry again. Yet marriages are either indissoluble, or they are not. If they can be dissolved after adultery, why not after desertion or violence? Or simply when the marriage has decayed from a life-giving love into stifling resentment and hostility? The 'Matthean exception' might open the door to something like contemporary reformed and historic Orthodox practice.

A slippery slope beckons. Who will judge which situations might be covered by the Matthean exception, and which not? We could end with divorce being justified on all sorts of dubious grounds. Would it not be wiser to stick to what the text actually says: that adultery alone provides the basis for ending a marriage? Such an approach would have the additional advantage of taking seriously one of the insights of the traditional theology of marriage: sexual intercourse really matters. This instinct was present in the medieval idea that marriage makes sex less sinful, and sanctifies human reproduction. It flowers in the much richer contemporary theology of marriage, which sees intercourse as, *par excellence*, an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of marriage: the fleshly coming together of lives in fruitful joy. In either perspective, intercourse is at the heart of marriage. Adulterous intercourse, therefore, could be seen as striking at that heart, an especially grievous assault capable of killing the marriage. So would run a 'conservative' argument aimed at restricting the grounds of divorce to adultery. The argument for absolute indissolubility, remember, is already lost in the Matthean exception.

However, if we must hold fast to what the Matthean exception allows without extending it further, note that what Matthew allows is for the husband to divorce his wife. The provision does not run both ways. This little noticed fact often causes great surprise when pointed out to contemporary readers. However, until quite recent times it was not considered unusual. In cultures where wives were regarded primarily as property and as material for breeding, an adulterous married woman not only sinned against her lord's property rights but risked inveigling another man's child into his inheritance. Male adultery by contrast (as long as it was not with a married woman) had no such consequences and therefore was judged not so catastrophically sinful. This was a perfectly usual interpretation of the Matthean exception until at least the eighteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ We may be appalled, and rightly claim liberty to reinterpret what Jesus said in the light of his broader teaching and principles – but if we do, we are going beyond the actual scope of the Matthean exception and the slippery slope looms again.

Secondly, while there is undoubtedly something powerful and true in seeing sexual intercourse as near the heart of marriage, we can also take sex *too* seriously. Richard Holloway has wisely observed, '...history has burdened the Christian experience of sex with unusual tensions, loading a natural reality with too much supernatural consequence.'^{iv} Take the words of C.S. Lewis, quoted above, about the transcendental bond set up 'whenever a man lies with a woman', to be eternally enjoyed or endured. That is a very strong view of the sacramentality of sex, pushing it to the point where intercourse becomes the constitutive sign of marriage, the deed which creates marriage. It reads wonderfully, and leads to bizarre and terrible conclusions. Granted that most people have more than one sexual partner in their lifetimes, most marriages are in fact adulterous or polygamous unions. Worse still, a woman is married to her rapist: the bond is set up between them 'whether they like it or not'.

Such conclusions follow from focussing exclusively on the act of intercourse as opposed to the wider relationship in which it occurs. We know they are ridiculous, and that it is the wider relationship to which we must pay attention. As soon as we do that, however, to make adulterous intercourse the *one* thing which can undo the marital bond loses all plausibility. Which is the bigger betrayal: the adulterous 'one night stand' or the emotional desertion of spouse for career, or the sustained reign of domestic violence? Reason compels a wider interpretation of the Matthean exception and opens the way to allowing divorce and remarriage.

One further obstacle remains. Marriage is meant to represent the union of Christ with his Church, the way in which joy weds itself irrevocably to human lives. This book has repeatedly rhapsodised about the fidelity which is signified and enabled through sacraments, about how Jesus goes on giving himself to and through his people regardless of the poverty of their response to Him. In baptism, Jesus makes himself the deepest reality of a person's life in a way that can never be undone, even if that person never responds to the joy beating within. In reconciliation, the penitent is absolved even if their response to that

absolution is pathetically inadequate. In ordination, Jesus promises to act through the ordained even if they are mired in deep and unrepentant sin. The promises Jesus makes in the sacraments - his marriage vows to his people - are unbreakable. So mustn't the sacrament of marriage be unbreakable too?

This is the theological heart of the indissolubilist tradition. It undoubtedly has great spiritual appeal. It *feels* right, it makes the deep kind of aesthetic moral sense which rings true within the Christian conscience and imagination. And indeed, marriage is meant to be forever. Divorce, however necessary it might be, always means a spiritual catastrophe has happened. The death of a marriage grievously wounds the couple, their children, and the community for whom they were walking sacraments.

Yet we must not confuse what should be the case with what is. Sometimes, marriages die. People can become the bearers of hate to each, rather than love. Strict indissolubilists say that nevertheless, the marital bond endures. They do so from the best of motives, but with terrible consequences. To say that those who find themselves in this desolate state must spend the rest of their lives without sexual intimacy is to impose a burden which few can bear. In the name of preserving inviolate a sacramental sign long devoid of actual life, men and women are required to renounce the call to sexual intimacy which Scripture and experience suggests is deeply inscribed within most hearts: 'it is not good that the man should be alone' (Gen. 2:18). It is no coincidence that the church which takes the hardest line on this is also that whose doctrine and discipline is most determined by celibates. Their forebears despised sex and marriage; now they idealise it to such an extent that its failure cannot be accepted. Nor can they quite understand why, when it does fail, the men and women involved cannot embrace the celibate life. The abiding error is a failure of realism.

And that error is not just pastoral, but theological: one of the most seductive for those who love the sacraments. It is the temptation of confusing signs with the thing signified. Yes, Christ's union with the church, joy's union with the world, is indissoluble. Even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Yes, that union is signified in and lives through human marriage; just like joy is signified in, and lives through the church. Yet in neither case are outward sign and inward reality point blank identical. Grace does not abolish nature. Bread remains bread. There is a sense in which Jesus lives in the church and the sacraments, emphasised throughout this book. Yet, nearing the end we must sound the crucial counterpoint: there is also a sense in which he does *not*. There was a glory greater than marriage at Cana. The church and the sacraments remain *signs*: realities which point beyond themselves to joy far beyond themselves. 'Now we see but in a glass darkly; then we shall see face to face' (1 Cor.13:12). And so, to the final chapter.

ⁱ Some might protest that in Charles' case, it was not the Marriage Service which was used but the 'The Order for Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage'. However, the latter service casts no doubt on the fact that what is being celebrated is a true marriage, and includes provision for blessing the couple. There is no real theological distinction between it and the Marriage Service. The only real effect of requiring divorcees to use the different service is to convey a certain reserve or disapproval concerning their new marriages – which is then contradicted by blessing them! The practice is theologically incoherent and pastorally crass.

ⁱⁱ Lewis, C.S. 1942 *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Collins) p.94

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example the 1644 view of the influential English theologian Henry Hammond, cited in More P.E. and Cross F.L. eds, 1935: *The Thought and Practice of the Church of England* (London: SPCK) pp.662-3

^{iv}Holloway, Richard 1997 *Dancing on the Edge* (London: Fount) p.98