

Divorce

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B), 6 October 2024

Revd Rob Miners

Malachi 2.10-16; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today's message is about divorce, and some clergy feel that it's a good Sunday to have a bad bout of laryngitis. I will deal with the subject both scripturally and pastorally, because that's the only way such a subject can be spoken of in a balanced way. The last time I preached on divorce it went like this. Firstly, there was total silence. You could have heard a pin drop. Then there were a few sniffs. Then came the tears. Then there was pastoral ministry for a fortnight thereafter. Because like all parishes, it had its share of divorced folk. One lady told me she'd been attending church for forty years and had never heard divorce preached on before.

Let me put the Gospel reading into context. The Pharisees were out to trap Jesus, as we're told in verse 2. The Pharisees came and tested Jesus by asking him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They were the religious legal men of their day. They were trying to trap Jesus because he had now travelled back into Herod Antipas's jurisdiction. This was the same Herod who had caused the death of John the Baptist for denouncing his divorce and remarriage.

In answering the Pharisees' inquiry, Jesus asked the question, "What did Moses command you?" They replied, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

Moses found he was forced into this situation because of the hardness or sin in man's heart and he had to bring in a regulation to remedy an immoral situation which was developing. In that patriarchal society, it was the man alone who had the sole right of divorce. But the real crux of the problem was the interpretation of the law as it is in Deuteronomy 24. There it is laid down that a man can divorce his wife if he finds in her some indecency. How was that phrase to be interpreted? There were in this matter two schools of thought.

There was the school of Shammai. They interpreted the matter with utter strictness. A matter of indecency was adultery and adultery alone. The other school was the school of Hillel. They interpreted that crucial phrase as widely as possible. They said that it could mean if the wife spoilt a dish of food, if she spun in the streets, if she talked to a strange man, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's relations in his hearing, if she was a brawling woman—which was defined as a woman whose voice could be heard in the next house. Rabbi Ackbar went even further. He said if a man found a woman who was fairer in his eyes than his wife was. Human nature being as it is, it was the lack of view which prevailed.

The result was that divorce for the most trivial reason or for no reason at all was tragically common. Moses permitted divorce in view of a lost ideal. Jesus went on to confirm that divorce was not part of God's original intention when ordaining marriage. God desires permanency in marriage. That's his will. A man and a woman and God.

That's the difference between a Christian marriage and a secular marriage. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate. That's also the words used in the prayer book for our marriage services. Those words imply that God is the binding factor in the union of marriage. The verse also implies that God is actually the creative force in the marriage. When

we hear the Pharisees say, Moses permitted divorce, it's like saying, well the neighbours did it, Hollywood does it regularly, why can't we? Jesus says, yes, divorce was permitted even in Old Testament times.

It still goes on. People still get hurt and hurt each other. The issue is not the letter of the law, but often is the issue of self-centeredness, of pride and arrogance.

For Christian people, the tragedy of divorce is a double-edged sword. Because there is this tremendous burden of having gone against the ideal of their Heavenly Father. And as a priest, I have seen this struggle so many times.

For many years, I was the Anglican chaplain for the Beginning Experience.¹ That was where we came together for three-day weekend at Blackfriars, Watson. And the people who came would come usually in a hurt state, but they would often leave in a very better state.

Marriage service in reverse. Yes, I'll tell you about this one. I was called to speak to a young lady who had gone through the divorce procedure and was not handling it well at all.

After we talked for a while, I prayed a prayer through with her. When we finished praying, the young lady was sitting on a chair with her face on her thighs—down. After a long pause, and I mean a long pause, I said, "Is everything okay with you?" She said, "That was extraordinary." She said, "That was as if I'd rolled up to the church on my wedding day and it was like a video being played in reverse." It just took her straight back through the marriage service as if she'd arrived at the church and she was free again.

When I speak to people about their divorce, I'm told many different things. "I didn't want a divorce." "I really believed our marriage was for life, but our marriage died." "I was suffering mentally, physically and emotionally. I just couldn't go on." One of the greatest hurts for divorced people, especially within a Christian congregation, is that they know other people really don't understand the pain which this tearing separation causes. And we don't.

Sylvia and I have seen the pain up close with two of our three daughters' marriages ending in divorce. Probably my fault, instilling in them that they need to be nice and forgiving people. When perhaps I should have instilled a little more mongrel.

When a divorce occurs, it is quite literally the death of those people's marriage. Involved in all of that are very similar feelings that others go through in the death of a spouse. But the problem is, there's no funeral. And the spouse continues to show up, especially where children are involved. Sylvia and I were at Tumut twice a month, on a Friday afternoon. We would meet a mother with a small child, one end of the main street block. We would walk that child up to the other end of the main street block and hand the child over to the father. We would go to have a cup of coffee. And at four o'clock we would go, retrieve the child, walk it back down the block, hand it back to mum. Awful. Awful.

These people need our compassion and support as they work through the feelings of anger, often guilt, fear, insecurity. And sometimes chronic depression. Sometimes a divorced person thinks, "At last I'm free again." It's the best thing that could have happened. But the person often realises, as months roll into years, that they're not free at all. And it's not necessarily the best thing that could have happened. They're not free because the repercussions go on unless a position of real forgiveness can be reached towards the other.

And sometimes it never does. I have included in the pew sheet the statistics for marriages and divorces for the past five years. It makes interesting reading.

¹ This was a weekend for people who had experienced loss through separation, divorce or death of a partner.

Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2019–23

	Marriages	Divorces	
2019	113,815	49,116	Pre-Covid
2020	79,987	49,510	Covid
2021	89,167	56,244	Covid
2022	127,161	49,241	
2023	118,439	48,700	

When you look at the peak of divorces, I take it that living at home in 2021 with COVID became the last straw for many people. There's no guarantees. No marriage is immune.

Recently I did a service at Queanbeyan Parish after having done a locum there for thirteen months, a couple of years back. And as I spoke with the office lady about some of the parishioners, I was stunned when she said that two couples had parted company. Fine Christian couples. I couldn't believe it. Divorce leaves a trail of pain and suffering, affecting not only the husband and wife, but the entire family and even friends of the couple.

So, what's the problem? A very complex question. There are as many reasons as there are people. But the most common are a lack of ability of either one or both parties to really listen or talk about things that really matter. That is, poor communication. An unwillingness to grow with the marriage, to change, a lack of kindness, a lack of care—and the list goes on and on and on.

The answer to society's numerous failed marriages is not in trial marriages, promiscuous sex or just living together. The trial marriages and living together are being found by more and more marriage counsellors to more of a burden and a cause of future scars than it could ever test. The real essence of the passage today is that Jesus insisted that the loose sexual morality of his day must be mended. Those who sought marriage only for pleasure must be reminded that marriage is also for responsibility. Those who regard marriage simply as a means of gratifying their physical passions must be reminded that it was also a spiritual unity.

Jesus was building a rampart around the home. The answer lies in a deeper understanding of the inner world of marriage. In marriages, couples look for healing from each other where the needs of one partner can be met, at least partially, by the resources of the other. The grace of God operates through this mutual healing of people in marriage. And where this healing isn't present, breakdown, or marriages of quiet desperation, follow.

In our Anglican Communion, of this diocese at least, the bishop's consent is required for remarriage of divorcees. The Church views marriage as one of the seven sacraments and places an extremely high value on the married state. Therefore, the Bishop needs to be assured by the parish priest that there has been learning from the death of the previous marriage, that there has been change, and that the new marriage will not be marred by carrying into the new relationship the very thing which may have ended the first marriage.

For the Christian, there is often a need and a request made for sacramental confession and absolution given in a definite way, so that Christ's forgiveness and love can come through and heal any guilt and blame which is often attached to divorce.

Many outside the Church see the Church as being wowsers when it speaks out on the issues which are destroying our society. But the Church is called to be the prophetic witness to the society in which it is part of. God tells us in the Malachi reading from this morning that he hates divorce. And the Church must also shoulder its responsibilities in providing proper programs for marriage preparation. Sylvia and my marriage preparation consisted of sign

here and here and “Which two hymns would you like?” We must have chosen two good hymns as we have been married now for 59 and a half years.

While the Church must continue to do all it can to facilitate reconciliation and, where possible, to encourage communication between separated partners, there are times where a marriage breaks down irretrievably and reconciliation isn't possible. And to try to endeavour to keep it together would even be considered unchristian and even dangerous—especially with the current statistics of one wife per week being murdered and sometimes children also.

Jesus recognised this in Matthew 19. Paul also struggled with the ideals he inherited and had to deal with the difficult human situation in 1 Corinthians 7. We think of ourselves as being the body of Christ and how the hurts of the individual affect us all. In our patterns of pastoral care, have we recognised the problems associated with children's deprivation of the mother or father figure in divorce—which is now being recognised by the education department endeavouring to recruit more male teachers for primary school? Have we thought about the loss of identity and often self-esteem a separated partner may be suffering? Their possible reduction in standard of living? Have we thought about their need to establish new friendships? Do we see the need in time people have in getting the past confessed so they can move on before they can live more abundantly in the present?

I finish with two true stories (names have been changed). First, Nora's story. Nora was married to a tough truckie, and she spent years putting up with drunkenness, verbal abuse and physical violence. One day Nora had had enough. She packed herself and her three children up and moved to town. He continued to harass her for some time but gradually came to realise she wasn't coming back.

Four years down the track, Nora still hurt inside. She carried around a load of resentment and anger that weighed ten tonnes. One day in church, she felt an inner conviction that she must forgive. She knelt in prayer and, as the tears began to pour down her face, she put a mental picture of her past husband in her mind and said, “I forgive you Bill, please forgive me.” When at last she walked out the church door she found that the ten-tonne weight had disappeared and that a great healing of her inner self had been given.

My second story is about Janelle. I met Janelle a number of years ago. She was a lovely Christian woman who had a very deep love of our Lord, a strong sure faith and believed wholeheartedly in the authority of scripture. Sadly, Janelle's marriage had ended in a bitter divorce involving much hurt to both parties and their only son. Some years, later she formed another close relationship, and this chap had asked her to marry him. Consequently, she spent many months in real inner conflict. The conflict was in God's ideal for a committed Christian, which she felt she had completely smashed, and that to remarry may even mean committing adultery. And her own loneliness and the need for a partner coupled with her now 14-year-old son.

One afternoon she was walking through a pine forest alone. It was totally still and quiet and she wasn't thinking about anything in particular. I guess very few of us can claim to have heard the audible voice of God, but Janelle did that day. As soon as she heard it, she knew immediately who it was, and she knew exactly what those words referred to. The voice simply said, “I forgive you, I forgive you.” Janelle is now very happily remarried.