

[Mark 10:1-16](#)

In recent times, a dark underbelly of the Christian church has been exposed to the world, mainly through sex abuse cases, often where the victims have been children.

I have to say, it's not the only dark side of the church I've witnessed. Today's reading gives a first century example of something that still goes on in the church.

What is it? It's manipulative politicking that seeks to put someone in an impossible situation. I've been on the receiving end of that. Worse still has been when accusers have made up false allegations against my wife as a way of getting at me.

I sometimes think that if I'd known in advance how nasty and slimy some church members would be, I'd have been reluctant to offer for the ministry.

Well, that's a cheerful start this week, isn't it? But it's exactly what the Pharisees are doing to Jesus in today's difficult reading. They are setting a trap. They are trying to discredit Jesus or put him in an impossible situation.

The Trap

Once again, I'm going to be critical of the Lectionary. Had we followed that strictly, we would have begun at verse 2, but verse 1 of Mark 10 carries some important information. It tells us that Jesus 'went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan.' That means he's in the territory of Herod Antipas. In chapter 6, Jesus' cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded following his criticism of Herod and Herodias divorcing their first spouses because they fancied each other. If Jesus now starts condemning easy divorce, then his life too could be in danger. It's really quite cynical of the Pharisees to happen to come up with this question in this territory.

And of course Jesus could be made to look harsh and uncaring if he held a hard line. Jewish law allowed divorce.

On the other hand, what if Jesus sides with easy divorce? It would undermine and contradict the ministry his cousin had had.

And furthermore, the only argument among the rabbis was about what constituted legitimate reasons for divorce. They believed that a man could divorce his wife 'Because he hath found in her indecency in anything.' Some

concentrated on the word 'indecent' and said that adultery was the only reason for divorce. Others concentrated on the words 'in anything' and said that the wife ruining a meal was sufficient cause for divorce.¹ On this basis, Jesus is being asked, which group of rabbis do you side with? And that reduces him to just another rabbi, no-one special – certainly not the Son of God.

What will Jesus do?

The Reversal

Jesus accomplishes a complete reversal. As so often in his ministry, he responds to a question with a question of his own. He won't allow himself to be trapped by his opponents' assumptions.

But this time he's especially clever. He asks a question where he knows what his opponents will say, and just as they're feeling like they're on solid ground he will take the ground from under their feet as if it were quicksand.

'What did Moses command you?' (verse 3) is his question, and he knows the Pharisees will jump to Deuteronomy chapter 24. Sure enough, they do.

⁴They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.'

And they think they've got him. Now then, Jesus, choose a side and choose your fate.

But no. Jesus is not going to allow those women who have been cast aside like an unwanted toy by their husbands also to be treated as the mere objects in a debate. And the way he does that is by exercising his divine authority, bursting out of their trap where they wanted him simply to pick one rabbi's interpretation versus another's.

⁵'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,' Jesus replied. ⁶'But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female". ⁷"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸and the two will become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this rule.' Who could know that except One who shared in the life of the Godhead? This isn't

the best interpretation that a rabbi can come up with: this is an authoritative divine declaration. What Moses gave wasn't an instruction that allowed Jewish men to treat their wives as disposable; it was a concession that limited the worst effects of divorce on women in a patriarchal society.

The Pharisees thought they had boxed Jesus into a corner. But Jesus has landed a knock-out punch.

And just to emphasise the point, Jesus takes the whole thing back to first principles – something the Pharisees failed to do, and something today's Church often fails to do as well.

The Principles

To take things back to first principles and to God's design for marriage, Jesus goes back to Genesis. He quotes from Genesis 1:27, the verse which declares that all humans are made in the image of God, when he says,

⁶ 'But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female".

In doing so, he establishes the equality of men and women in relationships. It is not that one sex owns the other.

And then Jesus goes into the other creation account in Genesis chapter 2, where he quotes verse 24, and draws a conclusion:

⁷ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Jesus very clearly tells his opponents that rather than look for all the get-out clauses, you should look for what marriage is about in the first place.

And what is marriage in Jesus' eyes here? It's between one man and one woman, exclusively, for life, and where the sexual act belongs as the sign (almost the sacrament!) of that lifelong unity.

The Methodist 'God In Love Unites Us' report tried to wriggle out of these clear conclusions by claiming that Genesis 2 was only about mutual help. Well, it begins there but it blatantly doesn't end there and Jesus won't let it end there. He authoritatively declares as the Son of God that this text teaches much more than that.

So where does that leave Jesus when it comes to the question of divorce?

The Problem

Jesus addresses this more when he goes into the house with his disciples:

¹⁰ When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, 'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'

In the context, Jesus is referring to the people who throw away their spouse because they are no longer wanted. That was what the Pharisees had in mind. That was the 'easy divorce' culture that had grown up in Jesus' day because Judaism had taken the teaching of Moses as a permission rather than a concession.

And not only do we know from this passage that Jesus had a concern for those who are treated as disposable objects by their spouses rather than equally made in the image of God, we also know from Matthew's version of this incident that Jesus specifically allowed divorce for those whose spouses broke their marriage vows by sexual immorality.

And it is this twin approach of Jesus – holding out high ideals while having compassion for those who are hurt – that shape our Christian approach to marriage and divorce.

On the one hand, we say to those who want to set out on this adventure that it will take commitment of a level they may well not have known before in their lives. Marriage takes work. It doesn't just happen, which is why the modern idea that 'marriage doesn't work' or 'we just drifted apart' do not sit easily with the Christian vision of marriage. I remind couples whose marriages I am taking that in their vows they won't say 'I do' – they'll say 'I will', which is both a promise and a commitment to an act of will. In fact, they say, 'With God's help I will,' because they will need God's help to live up to their vows.

On the other hand, we are not here to castigate those who are let down by a spouse who treats them as inferior and does not consider them worthy of loyalty and faithfulness. I once met a couple who wanted a church wedding, but the bride had been divorced after her first husband left her for someone

else. She had rather cruelly been told by a vicar they had approached before me that she was 'damaged goods'.

Can we – like Jesus – support and celebrate life-long marriage, while tending to the wounds of those who have been hurt by those with whom they had exchanged vows?

Because I believe that's what he calls his church to do.

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p299.