

**October 6, 2024 – Trinity 19 – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen**

Readings: Gen 2.18-24, Hebr 1.1-4, Mark 10.2-16

I guess that I am not the only here who finds this Gospel passage difficult. That is of course, the first part of it. Not the way it end with Jesus blessing the children. That's an image of him that we all just like, don't we? But as always, in Mark's gospel it all hangs together. What Jesus says about divorce and remarriage and what he says about children is all part of his teaching on a topic that is central to him, namely what the kingdom of God is all about. So it is right to read and reflect on these two distinct parts of the passage together. But let us start with the tough bit.

Jesus gets a tricky question; 'Is it allowed to divorce'? We hear, that this question was used as a trap. They want Jesus to take a side in the legalistic disputes that the rabbis had about how to interpret the law of Moses on divorce. Would Jesus be perhaps more strict, or would he show himself to be more liberal as he had been for instance around the sabbath and about food laws? But Jesus does not want to play their game. So he chooses to go not in a legalistic direction, but rather to give them a theological perspective on what the kingdom of God will be like. Therefore he starts with pointing towards the story of creation. Part of God's good creation is this wonderful opportunity for men and women to enter an intimate, monogamous relationship based on mutual love, respect and faithfulness. And it is only because of the brokenness of this creation, caused by the hardness of human hearts, that we have to talk about divorce at all. God gave Moses the law to help them to deal with this brokenness in a better way than without it. Things are certainly better when the law is followed, but something else was also needed. With the coming of the Messiah, 'in these last days' (Hebr. 1.2), we have reached a new phase in God's plan to heal this brokenness of creation. The kingdom of God is already starting to enfold among us, and we are all invited to join in. To follow the way of Jesus is to live out the values of that kingdom. And it is also looking through the eyes of Jesus, having a clear eye for the pain and the suffering that are still there even if things seem to be okay when it comes to following the letter of the law. Jesus must have been aware of the suffering in particular of women around marriages that have gone wrong and divorce. A suffering that was made even bigger, not smaller because of the legal practice in his days. Only men were allowed to ask for a divorce. Many women will have been trapped in marriages with adulterous men, or in which they were abused. And divorced women, unlike men, lost their property and social status and were therefore often left without any income. Forcing them to remarry quickly, or even become a prostitute in order to survive.

When Jesus is using those harsh words around divorce and remarriage, I have the feeling that he is fuelled by sadness and anger in view of all this suffering. About the fact that the pharisees were just focused on the right application of the rules and not on trying to change them in order diminish that very real pain of so many. But is Jesus now trying to overbid the pharisees by making their laws around divorce and remarriage even much stricter? What is going on here? His disciples are clearly puzzled. This time they dare to ask him about it, when they are amongst themselves. But then it gets even more puzzling. And to be frank, it stays

like that until today, as every new generation tries to find its way in how to apply these and other words of the Bible within the specific context they find themselves in. Finding answers to questions such as; is Jesus really saying that nobody should ever have a divorce? Is he commanding every divorcee to stay alone for the rest of his or her life? And by bringing up the importance of marriage as an opportunity for human flourishing that is part of God's good creation, is Jesus implying that it is wrong to stay unmarried? And to bring in two other questions that by some are linked to this passage: When Jesus speaks about a man and a woman becoming one flesh, does he then automatically exclude the possibility of goodness to be found in an intimate relationship between two persons of the same gender? And is he dismissing here all who cannot define themselves in a clear binary way as male or female?

We are touching here upon some very contentious issues that cause much division. Also within the church to which we belong, the Church of England. In my opinion, our church has come up with some excellent materials on these issues under the heading 'Living in Love & Faith'. If you are interested in these issues, please take a look on the CofE website, or ask me for further information. These materials are meant to increase our mutual understanding and thereby the chance that we are able to disagree in a good way, while staying under the same church roof and being part of the same congregation. I think it is needed to continue to make that effort.

But I think it is only fair to give you my way of reading this Gospel passage. I don't think that Jesus is dismissive here or elsewhere of a celibatarian life style, already because he never married himself. Though we should certainly not think lightly about divorce and remarriage, I don't think it is right to read into this passage a dismissal by Jesus of all divorcees in general, and all those who have remarried in particular. We should also be aware of the amount of suffering and pain that has been caused by the way former generations have tried to apply these words within our societies in civil laws and within our churches through the centuries. I agree with the fact that, after long discussions, the Church of England has made it permissible to remarry in church. It is left to the discretion of the individual priest to make a pastoral decision on this issue. A wise solution that respects different opinions. Finally, I find it farfetched to read into this Gospel passage a rejection by Jesus of those who enter what we now call a same-sex relationship, or a rejection of those who define their gender in a non-binary way. As far as we know, Jesus has not expressed himself about these issues. Our relationships and our sexual desires are of course vital aspects of the way we have been created as human beings. They can contribute to human flourishing, as well cause human suffering. So the Bible is not silent on these topics. But when we delve a bit deeper, directions may not be as crystal clear and readily applicable in all circumstances as they seem to be. So, we will have to continue to ask the Spirit for guidance in all these matters, both when it comes to our own personal choices in the way we lead our life, as well as in the life of the church as a whole.

But there is a very hopeful ending of this passage in that second part, and I think we can at least all agree on this message. When we hear about the way Jesus welcomes the children into his kingdom. How he tells us that we are able to join them, when we look for him and

his kingdom, just like them. Because, our deepest identity is and will always be the fact that all of us, no one excluded, are God's beloved children. Amen