

Sermon

'God made them male and female'

Year B 2021, Pentecost 19, Mark 10:2-16¹



¹ Mark 10.2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

In Chichester Cathedral in England there is a medieval tomb of the Earl and Countess of Arundel. Above the tomb is suspended the Earl's knightly helmet, sword, shield, and banner. Below dressed in armour is the effigy of the Earl resting recumbent alongside his beautiful Countess. While much of the image has been damaged beyond recognition, their clasped hands remain untouched. A poet, reflecting on this image, wrote: 'What will survive of us is love'.

From beginning to end, the Bible is a witness to the love of God for the world. From the book of Genesis, to the Book of Revelation, it is a testimony to God's love for the world.

A love revealed, once and for all, in Christ. And his death for the reconciliation of the world to God. And in the Christian church, of Jew and Gentile, a sign of hope for the world. A present sign, of future hope. Of the future of the human race, reconciled, redeemed, restored, renewed, in the kingdom of God.

The church is 'essentially missional'. A sign of future hope for the world. A sign that points beyond itself, to the future. To the kingdom of God. To salvation.

But marriage, too, is a sign of future hope for the world. A sign that points beyond itself, to the future. To the kingdom of God. To salvation.

To a destiny that is signalled, too, in creation itself. In the creation of the human race, male and female. And in the created destiny of the human race, for the marriage relation.

In today's Gospel, in response to the Pharisees question about divorce, which, we are told, is there to test Jesus, Jesus points them to the creation of human beings. For Jesus, creation itself reveals the love of God. In love God created the world, male and female. In love God destined the world, male and female, for the fellowship of marriage. For Jesus, God has created human beings to be male and female. Jesus concludes from this that a lifelong, monogamous fellowship between husband and wife, is the Creator's will for human beings. The unbreakable fellowship of marriage, therefore, is the goal of God's creation of the human race (Mark 10:2-9).

The divine plan, is for the reconciliation of the world, to God. At the centre of which, is Jesus Christ himself, and with him, the body of Christ, the church of reconciled humanity, Jew and Gentile. And the one body of marriage - not just of Christians, but of non-Christians, too - is part of God's plan for the reconciliation of the world. In the reconciled relationship of the human race, male and female. The love, and the will of God, for the world that he made.

That marriage is an expression of the destiny of the human race in the future of the kingdom of God, does not mean that those who are unmarried do not share in this destiny. Marriage is only a sign of our future destiny. It does not make it effective. Holy baptism, and holy Eucharist, are the means of means of grace, by

which Christians share in the destiny of eternal life with God. For the Apostle, being single, for the sake of the kingdom of God, too, is a special calling (1 Cor 7.32). Christ is not present in every marriage. Only when Christians who are married comprehend that marriage as a sign of future destiny in the kingdom of God *in faith*, do they share in Christ's salvation in marriage.

That the human race is ordained in creation for the permanent, lifelong partnership of marriage, is part of the distinctly Christian understanding of the human person, that rests on Jesus words this morning about marriage, that God's purpose is that it be unbroken. 'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' (Mk 10.9) Of course we have here a goal that is not always and everywhere achieved. Like our human nature, as a set goal, an objective, it must be lived out in cultural and social life. For that same reason, it will not be achieved, only in this world. But in the light of the human destiny, of ourselves, and the human race, in the future kingdom of God, beyond death, marriage, like baptism, like the Eucharist, is a sign, only a sign, but a real sign, of the destiny of the human race in the future of the kingdom of God.

'Listen, I will tell you a mystery!..We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.'

The Christian understanding of the human race, that it is destined, for future glory, is present already in God's creation of the human race. In creation, destiny, is revealed. We are not yet. We are, all of us, a work in progress.

German sociologist Helmut Schelsky says of lifelong, monogamous marriage that it is the womb of our Western culture, and of its intellectual and spiritual life. By offering to women a security and social position previously unseen within the Jewish tradition, or throughout the ancient world, in the history of the world, it was the specifically Christian understanding of marriage, that was the starting point for the equality of the sexes (Gal 3.28), based on the principle of mutual, self-giving love.

The goal of marriage is the equality of the sexes. The equality of the human race, male and female. Like human nature itself, as a goal, of course, it has not always been lived up to, and rarely to its full extent. Nevertheless, it is an essential part of our human nature, that along with monogamy, remains an 'ideal of marriage' (Schelsky). An ideal that in the history of Christianity, and its cultural impact on the world, has taken on a normative significance, because, in the words of Schelsky, 'in a monopolizing of sexual relations in marriage it puts the partners above the striving for personal and especially sexual satisfaction, and in the nurturing of a relationship and common destiny for husband and wife that survives death, it is finally the basis of marriage and the fulfilment of personality.'

Says Wolfhart Pannenberg, arguably the leading Christian theologian in the world in the last 50 years, whose own work has informed my sermon this morning, 'One can hardly find a better way of formulating the significance for humanity of the Christian understanding of marriage that rests on the relation to the mystery of Christ. As Schelsky goes on to say, it follows that 'precisely because this demand blends human sexuality into the most sublime heights of human existence and spirituality, not-withstanding all statistical and psychological proofs of the rarity and improbability of its achievement, it is something that cannot be lost as a final claim on the relationship of male and female in our culture.'

The Lord be with you.

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Vicar