

## **Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook**

2/3 October 2021

### **Welcome**

Before I speak about today's Gospel, I'm reminded of a story about a young priest, who once gave a thrilling homily on marriage, love and happiness. As they left the church, one not-so-young parishioner was overhead saying to her friend: "Wasn't he wonderful, wasn't he marvellous." "Yes," her friend agreed and then added: "I wish I knew as little about marriage as he does!"

Today, what we may call the landscape of marriage and relationships is very different, and much more varied, than it used to be. Not only are there different kinds of permanent and non-so-permanent relationships, but most significantly the place of women in society and in marriage has evolved, thank God. We did live in a highly patriarchal society. We have moved on or are at least trying to move on. The Bible was certainly written in such a society and from a deeply patriarchal perspective. You might be forgiven for wondering, why should we listen to opinions about marriage and relationships that come from two or three thousand years ago.

### **Topic**

In the case of our Gospel today, awareness of what was happening at the time can help.

### **Steps**

At the time of Jesus, divorce was practised among the Jews, as it is today. There were, however, disputes about the grounds for divorce. The opinions ranged from strict to absurd to arbitrary. A rabbi called Shammai said: you may divorce but only if something immoral has occurred – most likely he meant adultery. Another rabbi called Hillel said that if the wife burnt a pot or spoiled the food, that would be grounds for divorce. And finally, Rabbi Aqaba gave his opinion: if the husband simply falls for someone else, then divorce is allowed. Contemporary hearers will notice three things: the woman's opinion is not required – it is a patriarchal society; only the man may initiate proceedings; and consistently with that, the husband's failings are not taken considered at all. Shammai was fairly strict, Hillel was absurd and even Aqiba was arbitrary. A woman in that society was always in potential jeopardy. She could always be sent back, in shame, to her father's house. That's the context for Jesus' teaching.

We notice as well that Jesus rejects even the way the question is posed. Jesus' innovative teaching against divorce and remarriage would have been heard in three ways. Firstly, it would have protected women from arbitrary dismissal. Secondly, because his teaching cut directly across the common opinion, it would have been heard as prophetic – in the sense of saying something unconventional and different. Thirdly, Jesus goes back not to the book of Deuteronomy but to the book of Genesis and to the stories of creation – male and female he created them – and affirms that a life-long bond is part of the creator's design.

One further clarification may be helpful and perhaps a little disorienting. The historical Jesus did not typically *legislate* and his teaching is not a law. Instead, Jesus holds up and original ideal and an original understanding of what is good for us as human, before God. The ideal stands, but at least on the lips of Jesus, it is not meant to be a new legal burden, but a high ideal, the original ideal of the creator, towards which we strive.

Of course, there are very happy marriages – we may hope the majority. Of course, marriages do break down, a painful reality for many. Of course, many enter second relationships – a second chance at love and happiness. All are to be received with compassion and understanding. But what seems fairly clear from the psychology and counselling is this: we human beings flourish best in committed, constant and reliable relationships. We need to know that no matter what the love of my life will be there for me no matter what. If that is in place, it is possible, firstly, to face almost anything together and, secondly, to let yourself be fully known in all your vulnerability and giftedness. Children, too, flourish best in committed, constant and reliable relationships.

In a word, the ideal upheld by Jesus is confirmed simply by experience and observation and also by deeper studies of human nature. Sometimes, the psychologists and the philosophers go to great trouble to discover the obvious.

## **Conclusion**

Even while aware that the landscape of marriage and relationships has changed beyond recognition, we should not be afraid to be lifted up by the ideal of life-long faithfulness.

There is a prayer in the marriage rite which goes like this:

*Love is our origin  
Love is our constant calling  
Love is our fulfilment in heaven*

Of course, it is challenging and costly, but at the same time, when it flourishes it brings extraordinary personal happiness and well-being.

I'll stop there before I begin to sound like the young priest!