

Donnybrook

25 February 2022

Welcome

It is delicate to comment on today's Gospel. In the community of faith, some – most – will have lived their marriage vows faithfully and found happiness and deep fulfilment. At the same time, we all have friends and relatives in second marriages which are also happy and wholesome.

Topic

How do we hold up the ideal and live with the real? Perhaps this much might help.

Steps

The Gospel teaching goes back substantially to the historical Jesus. I say substantially because in Jewish culture, a woman could not initiate divorce. One of the reasons we know it goes back to Jesus because already in the New Testament there are exceptions to the strict ideal. Matthew makes an exception and so does Paul.

Once I was teaching this passage and I read a commentary on Mark by an esteemed colleague, Wilfrid Harrington. He seemed to hint that Jesus was holding up an ideal and not legislating. As the author was a colleague and present, I asked him. He said, yes, Jesus is holding up an original ideal but not legislating, something Jesus virtually never does. Of course, in the tradition, it has become a law, more or less in all the churches. It is interesting that when Prince Charles married for the second time, the wedding was not a church wedding, in spite of his eminence. Still, precision in law is not everything: I was not the only one taken aback when the present British prime minister, after a varied marriage career, was able to marry in a Catholic service. In any case, the ideal of Jesus stands, a noble ideal, a restoration of stability and in its day a protection of women.

What about the real? Here we are helped by two passages of Scripture. The first is: be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate. People making their second attempt at goodness and happiness are to be received with the compassion and mercy of God. In other words, whatever the law, in a practical situation pastoral care must be our guide. The second text is a very generous one from the first letter of St John: whoever lives in love, lives in God and God lives in them. In that spiritual view, strict observance of the law takes you only so far.

Conclusion

In the previous translation of the Missal, there was a very attractive prayer for weddings which went like this: love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfilment in heaven. Amen.