

Jesus teaches on marriage and children by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th October 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16

Keys to a successful Marriage

In the 14 years that I have been at St Michael's, I have lost count of the number of weddings I have conducted. It must be at least 150. And for each one, I try to find a joke to start off my sermon. As the choir know, I don't have many wedding jokes. Here's one that's had a few airings:

A vicar met a man who had been married for 66 years. "Amazing. 66 years!" he said. "What's the secret to such a long, happy marriage?"

"Well," the man replied, "It's like this. The man makes all the big decisions... and the woman just makes the little decisions."

"Really?" responded the vicar. "Does that really work?"

"Oh, yes," he said proudly. "66 years, and so far, not one big decision!"

Every couple on their wedding day hope that it will be the start of a long and happy marriage. And there is lots of advice out there if you look for it, some of which is contained in the readings which the couples choose. Here are a few gems which I found on the internet.

The poet Ogden Nash wrote

"To keep your marriage brimming with love in the wedding cup, whenever you're wrong, admit it; whenever you're right, shut up."

That certainly seems like a good way to avoid unnecessary arguments. By contrast, Phyllis Diller, the American comedian, said,

"Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight."

One of the key tips we share with couples in our marriage preparation course is to learn your own and your partner's love languages – how you and the other person like to express love and receive it.

A wife said to her husband: "Our new neighbour always kisses his wife when he leaves for work. Why don't you do that?"

Husband: "How can I? I don't even know her."

Today we are going to look briefly at some of Jesus' teaching on marriage and children. Many of the things that make for a good marriage are also good for other relationships. And the same God who created marriage created each of us and wants the best for each of our lives. So I hope that there will be something helpful for you to take away, whether you *are* married, *have been* married, or *have never been* married.

But first, I want to give you a few moments to think about this question: *What would be the key ingredients for a good marriage?*

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If we can identify attitudes and behaviour which would lead to a good marriage, then it must also be true that the lack of these good attitudes and behaviours would be likely to lead to a marriage getting into trouble.

You will have noticed that Jesus' comments on marriage in today's gospel reading were prompted by a question about divorce. You might think, therefore, that the passage is primarily

about divorce, and whether it should be allowed. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Pharisees ask Jesus a question: is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? And Jesus answers with a question: what did Moses teach? The answer, of course, is that Moses allowed divorce. So, then, there's the answer: divorce is allowed. So I don't think you can say from this passage that Jesus didn't allow divorce. He himself said elsewhere that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. And here he acknowledges that divorce is sometimes necessary because of people's hard-heartedness. In other words, relationships sometimes break down to the point where there is no longer a willingness on both sides to put things right. And of course, there are situations where staying in a marriage could be seriously detrimental to a person's physical or mental health. There is evidence that at the time of Jesus neglect and abuse were grounds for divorce as well as adultery, and that these grounds gave protection for women as well as men¹.

And before we go on to the next bit of Jesus' teaching, let's remember who it is that is saying these words. This is the man who accepted Zacchaeus, a tax collector who cheated people; who affirmed a woman who was known for her sinful life for her love, and told her to go in peace; who refused to condemn a woman caught in adultery, saved her from being stoned, and told her to go and have a new start; this is the man whose closest friend denied him, but who forgave him and put him in charge of his church.

This is a Saviour who knows all about our weaknesses, failings and sins and still dies for us on a Cross. This is the Son of God who took flesh in order to save a world that had turned its back on its Creator, and who was willing to suffer a violent death at the hands of those who should have welcomed him so that he could set us all free from slavery to selfishness and pride and make us the sons and daughters of his loving heavenly Father.

Jesus sees through the question on divorce to an attitude that treats other people as expendable. Divorce your wife and get a better model. No, Jesus explains to the disciples, giving your wife a certificate of divorce so that you are free to marry someone else is only a legalised form of adultery. God has much better plans for us than that! God's intention is that a man and a woman who marry become one flesh, joined together not only in sexual union but in the union of their hearts and lives. Jesus quotes from two verses from the two creation stories in Genesis chapters 1 and 2.

The first verse he quotes is Genesis 1:27, which says "Male and female he created them". And the second is 2:24, which comes at the end of the story where God makes Eve to be a companion for Adam. *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."*

Marriage, in the will of God, is the basis of family life. The family is the place where we grow up, know we are loved and accepted, gain confidence and develop our gifts. It is also the place where we learn to love and respect others. When a couple marry they are creating a new family unit which takes precedence over the families they have come from. A marriage, like the family we grew up in, should be a place where we receive and give love, and where we continue to grow and develop as people. Husband and wife are to be companions to each other, and their sexual intimacy is to be an expression of the spiritual unity which marriage brings. But it is at the same time an expression of the differences between them, differences which also enrich their relationship.

Not everyone is called to be married. Both Jesus and St Paul in his letters make it clear that as disciples of Christ our first commitment is to him, whether we are married or single. The Church is both the Bride of Christ and the family of God, and should also be a place where we can find companionship, support, and opportunities to give and receive love, and to grow and develop. Just as husband and wife are "one flesh", so Christians are all members of "one Body", the Body of Christ.

And that is why Jesus tells us to value children. They too are members of the family of God, and have just as much access to God as adults. Just as Jesus teaches us to value marriage by referring to the Creator's original intentions, so he shows how much he values children by welcoming them.

In our gospel reading, the disciples, keen to protect Jesus from being pestered by what they consider to be "pushy parents", seem to be quite rude to them. Like the Pharisees in the previous conversation, they fail to see what is the most important issue, and Jesus has to put them straight. These children, he says, are not a nuisance, they are precious to God and a lot more open to him than most of the adults he's met. "Truly I tell you," he says, as he puts his arms round the children, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:15). If we could have an attitude towards God that is half as intimate and trusting as these children have towards their parents, we would really know what the Kingdom of God is all about.

Just as marriages are not disposable, and wives are not to be discarded or swapped for other women, so also children are not to be devalued and disregarded. Try to see them through God's eyes, Jesus seems to be saying.

What about us today?

It might seem on the face of it that society today is nothing like the society of Jesus' day. There are certainly some features of modern society that have no parallel in the ancient world, such as the influence of social media. But people have not fundamentally changed, and the principles of Jesus' teaching can still be applied to new situations. Indeed, Christians are called to shed God's light in the world, not to blindly follow the changing fashions of popular culture.

Here are some of the current issues that we need to engage with:

- Government consultation on changing the criteria for divorceⁱⁱ. (You may be aware of the woman who was refused a divorce by the court recently because her husband wouldn't agree. It is interesting that unlike the 1st century, where most divorces would have been initiated by men, the majority of divorces in this country are now initiated by women.)
- Civil Partnerships for opposite-sex couples: this follows a legal challenge by a couple who felt marriage was too patriarchal and didn't reflect their views on equality between men and women; marriage may have been patriarchal in the past, but there is plenty in the Bible to support equality between men and women in marriage.
- Marriage for same-sex couples: the legislation is now firmly embedded in English law.
- The #MeToo movement: Sexual misconduct towards women is being challenged and men who have got away with it in the past are being named and shamed.
- Domestic abuse: not just physical violence but mental and emotional abuse which can be just as damaging.
- Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults: what would Jesus think about the failure of institutions, including the Church of England, to protect people from abuse? We are now taking this very seriously. If you have been asked to go on a safeguarding course because of what you do in the church, it may be a pain and an inconvenience, but please do your bit. We need not only to make sure we work safely, but also to show the world that we are just as serious as them about this.
- Influence of pornography on young people: how many children aged 10 and under are watching pornography on their smartphones and having their views on how men and women relate corrupted by this? Often without their parents having a clue. We are now seeing child-

on-child abuse, and we need to take seriously the huge dangers posed to our children and their ability to have respectful and meaningful relationships in the future.

It seems that while our liberal society claims to be more free and more caring, we are seeing a trend of people being increasingly dehumanised. As Christians, we believe that each person, male or female, young or old, is equally precious in God's eyes, and worthy of respect and dignity.

As far as marriage goes, Jesus challenges the narrow views of the society of his day. Instead of being hard-hearted and rule-bound, we should be looking at our lives the way God does and seeking his intentions and his will for them. That way we will be in a position to enjoy the blessings God has for us.

The wellbeing of children is threatened in new and insidious ways. Christians should be in the forefront of challenging modern practices which prevent them fulfilling their God-given potential.

The church above all should be a place where all people can find acceptance, support and opportunities to grow and find their place in God's Kingdom.

The main point

Whoever we are, and whatever our experience of life, the most important lessons to take from today's gospel are that God values people and relationships and wants the very best for us all. That should be a comfort to us, but it also may represent a challenge. Are we seeking God's best for ourselves, our marriages and families, and for others in our society, especially those who are most at risk of becoming the victims of the self-centredness and hard-heartedness of others? If we want our society to become more Christian, we need to help it move away from a "hard-hearted" concentration on rights and laws towards a culture that provides protection for the vulnerable and cares for those who cannot speak up for themselves.

And all of us need to ask God to help us see ourselves and our relationships in the light of his good purposes for the world. And we also need to use Jesus' way of looking at issues surrounding marriage, the family and children to help us challenge the current attitudes that seem to focus on the desires and self-interest of adults at the expense of children's needs. Most of all, we need to pray for marriage and family life in our society, and perhaps as we do so, God's way of thinking will become our own.

ⁱ For a summary of biblical teaching on divorce: <http://www.divorce-remarriage.com/>

ⁱⁱ Government consultation on reforming the grounds for divorce

<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/reform-of-the-legal-requirements-for-divorce/>