

To be honest, I have really struggled with the readings for today. They are readings that are often misquoted, hard to place in context, and even when they are placed in context after still incredibly unpalatable to most. The references to divorce and women often mean that no matter what is said we each already have a track playing in our head about what we think is going to be said. In addition to that, many of the overt issues in these readings are not really the issue which is being addressed.

I have spent most of the last three days trying to find distractions so that I didn't have to deal the dilemma that these readings present. Having said that, we had the longest and most exciting tea & chat in a long time; and I had a fabulous time gardening in the rain yesterday morning with others from the congregation. I even allowed the beautiful singing of the choir who were rehearsing yesterday to create a space for meditation rather than writing.

The challenge of distractions of course is, that when they are done, the issue you were trying to avoid is still left in front of you. Not unlike the Pharisee's in today's gospel reading – who came to Jesus with a difficult question which they assumed would trip him up. In this section of Mark, as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem the interactions between Jesus and the teachers become more intense as they attempt to trap Jesus with arguments of the law. The problem was of course, that Jesus didn't seem trappable – even when they presented laws, such as those relating to divorce Jesus does not answer as they expect. At one level, the Pharisees are not asking about Divorce at all, it is an issue, which is not really the issue that is being asked. It's purpose is to see if Jesus will challenge the law by which they live. It is for this reason that this section is all about men – under the law at the time women had few rights in marriage, and none in divorce; so the question being asked relates purely to the conduct of men under the law.

The most interesting part of the passage which we just read is the last few verses because Jesus also changes the question that is being asked. He suddenly starts talking about the rights or behaviour of women in divorce (of which there were none) and also of the rights of children. It is not only unusual in the context, but difficult for the disciples to grasp, let alone the wider community. Jesus has taken the question about divorce and stretched it out to address the nature of relationships – all kinds of relationships.

The Pharisees cite the rule Moses gave which allows for divorce to occur. But Jesus puts this allowance in tension with the narrative from the books of Moses that argues against it. Jesus recalls that God created humankind in God's image.

Marriages, as well as relationships between adults and children or the rich and poor, are proposed as spheres where we can live toward the other in the promise of our divine image. Jesus relativizes the law of God in light of the story of God. Jesus argues that God's creational desire for integrity in our relationships remains. While

Moses might have made allowances in some cases, this does not nullify God's original intent – that we might all live in harmony.¹

But there is even more at stake here than even divine nature. These last two verses of the passage are about those who are drawn to this divine nature. Mark recounts the story of people – parents, single-parents, women, divorced women? – bringing children to be “touched” by Jesus. Most often in Mark, when someone wants to be touched they want to be healed. So it may be that these children are sickly, which may explain a bit, if not defend, the disciples' reaction. Yet Jesus is indignant, instructing not only that these people be allowed to bring their children to him for a touch of blessing and healing, but that it is to precisely these children – suffering, dependent, and vulnerable – that the kingdom of God belongs².

This will have shocked the community listening to Jesus, and I suspect also shocked many who follow Jesus today. Jesus confirms that law is important. But he also affirms that when a relationship breaks down, those who are part of that relationship are torn too; and if God has blessed that relationship – God too is torn. I suspect all of us can think of a situation where we know this is true. But what Jesus says in this passage is look – in a perfect world – in God's Kingdom (if it were allowed by humanity to succeed) such tearing would not occur – but since it does God regularly shows to care for precisely those who have been torn apart, as well as those who are alone, dependent, vulnerable, suffering, disenfranchised, and hurting. The kingdom of God draws in the vulnerable, and it is this drawing, this healing which in the end will trump all laws.

What an amazing turn in a passage which reads so harshly.

Just when we think we have worked out the question, or even the answer, it turns out Jesus isn't even on the same page!

When I finally took the time to stop running away from these passages yesterday afternoon I was really struck by this call to be the people of God in a way that draws people in, draws people towards a God that heals, that bring changes and wholeness. But how do we do this?

On Thursday I had lunch with several colleagues including one who had just returned from sabbatical. They were talking about how we as the church draw others in, how do we help others come to learn what we have learnt - that God welcomes and heals us. That we are nurtured by prayer and by the love of God and those around us.

Much of the training we receive focuses on making the church more warm, more welcoming, more contemporary, more accessible – all good things. We reflected however that you can only be draw to church, or God, or to faith if you either you

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3789

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/10/pentecost-20-b-the-issue/>

are looking for it, or you know what it is. The challenge in our current society is not that people think God is dead, or irrelevant, or misrepresented – rather that a large majority of people have never heard of God, do not know what spirituality is, or have a language to ask the questions that would help them find out.

It is a new challenge – but comes back to the questions from today's passages – sometimes the issue being asked is not the issue!

So while this was all mulling around in my head – I was sitting in the high dependency ward at the Whittington Hospital with my 88 year old cousin who has now been in hospital for over 7 weeks. On many of my visits, including yesterday, I have a conversation with my cousin which goes something like this.

'This is a strange, boring, happy, ... place'

Yes I will say – it's the hospital and you have been here for ... weeks.

Have I dear?' – how nice of you to visit. she responds!

Soon after she often falls asleep. While she was sleeping yesterday I read a commentary on our Hebrews reading for today as I was still procrastinating on the way forward.

Hebrews for the most part is written as a sermon – there are many theologians who suggest that Hebrews is written as a conclusion or continuation to the Old Testament. The author is unknown, but it does appear to be addressed to Hebrew communities who understood the law and had embraced the teaching of Jesus and the new way. Based on comments throughout the book; this group had apparently been a rather successful new mission start. At first they had received the gospel message with excitement. Their worship and life together was full of vitality (Hebrews 2:3-4). Problems arose when that led to friction with people outside the community, who apparently found this enthusiastic group of worshipers too peculiar to fit into the conventional social order. But over time a malaise set in. The real crisis was one of apathy. Some simply drifted away. When asked why they no longer came to worship, they replied that they simply forgot or did not feel like it. The gospel seemed promising at one point, but over time the actual experience of life in Christian community seemed to fall far short of the kingdom of God³. The commentator stated '*Hebrews pictures Christ as a pioneer, as one who charts the course through the difficult landscape in order that others may follow. The pioneer endures hardship for the sake of something far greater. Hebrews will repeatedly declare that God's purposes remain clear and firm.*'

Not unlike with my cousin, we need to state and restate where and why we are.

Jesus said to his disciples we are here to draw the vulnerable to God.

The writer to the Hebrews affirms our purpose as praise and worship.

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3790

I wonder what we affirm.

In the coming months we will be asked the question a number of times, and I wonder how we respond – today and then?

Amen