



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you were asked a question by someone trying to catch you out. What did you do?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of all compassion,
whose love runs deeper than we could ever imagine,
we thank you for the grace that sets us free to truly live,
for the forgiveness that enables us to begin again,
for the comfort your Holy Spirit brings us in times of trial.
As we look to you to guide and inspire us on our way,

help us to love mercy, act justly and walk humbly with you,
so that through us,
the world may know of your goodness.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,
who for our sakes opened his arms wide on the cross,
and embraced our hurting and messy world.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 8 (Singing the Faith 801)

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
**what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.

**You have given them dominion over the works
of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.**

**O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and fresh hope,
we bring to you those things in our lives and our world
in need of your refreshment and renewal.

When we've valued following rules above following you,
Christ, forgive us.

When we've lost sight of you amid the pressures of life,
Christ, refresh us.

When we've been hurt by unjust rules or actions,
Christ, comfort us.

When systems and rules have been used to exclude or harm,
Christ, rebuke us.

When your Church has forgotten its reason for being,
Christ, renew us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal and fresh hope,
thank you that you forgive us, renew us,
and set us free to live for you.

Amen

Reading Mark 10:1 – 16

Sermon

There is no question that this week's Gospel passage is particularly difficult to grapple with, as talking about divorce can provoke strong reactions. Some of you will think it a good thing that UK divorce laws have been liberalised in recent decades, and indeed that instigating

'no fault' divorces would remove the acrimony that often comes with blame having to be attributed to one partner. Others, perhaps citing texts such as today's reading, will think that divorce is wrong, except in cases of adultery and/or abuse, and yet others will sit somewhere between the two ends of the spectrum. Moreover, almost everybody will know somebody who's felt trapped in a loveless marriage where divorce wasn't an option, someone who has been through a difficult and messy separation following discovery of their partner's adultery and betrayal, and someone who found legally ending their marriage to be a liberating experience. All this serves to illustrate how divorce is both a complex and highly emotive issue.

What I think we can say is that today's passage has been used over the years by the Church to push divorcees and their children toward the margins of society, which goes a long way to explain the hostility towards Boris and Carrie Johnson being allowed to marry within the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Westminster despite their relationship having led to the former's divorce, something viewed as hypocritical in the extreme by many commentators. The late feminist theologian Phyllis Trible coined the famous term 'texts of terror' when exploring the stories of women whose suffering was documented in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. Others have borrowed her expression to describe biblical passages frequently used to 'justify' the oppression of various groups of people, along the lines of ethnicity, for example. Our reading has been described as a 'text of terror' in relation to the subject of divorce, as theologians have claimed that Jesus' reaction to the Pharisees prohibits it in all circumstances. More recently, this passage has been utilised by some to argue that same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry, and by many of the same people to deny the validity of trans experience and realities. It therefore needs very careful handling in order to make sense of it.

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem with his disciples, and was busy teaching the crowds of Judea when a group of Pharisees asked him

whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife (Mark 10:2). Now, we need to recognise that marriage was understood very differently to how it is generally perceived in Twenty-First Century Britain. Love is the main reason that couples marry nowadays, whereas property, status, and family honour were the principal motives for marrying in the Jewish culture of Jesus's time. Moreover, in a deeply patriarchal society, women were treated as the property of men, so that female sexuality was effectively separated from individual autonomy. When a woman got married, she was handed over from father to husband, and had very little in the way of rights and status of her own. Divorce left women incredibly vulnerable in social, economic and legal terms in an age in which societal structures kept them dependent on men, and in some cases, it was basically a death sentence.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus their question, at the heart of their test for him was the fiery inter-Jewish debate about what constituted appropriate grounds for divorce. In Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4, provision is made for a man to legally divorce his wife upon finding 'something objectionable about her', though the context for this was prohibiting that same couple to re-marry if the woman had subsequently found a second husband. He was to issue her with a certificate which gave her a degree of protection, when being suspected of having children outside of wedlock could lead to being killed, something that Jesus' questioners omitted to mention when they thought of a hypothetical couple. This highlights the reason he accused them in 10:5 of being hard-hearted – a lack of compassion for the woman in that situation, coming from a position of relative power and status.

So, what could constitute something objectionable enough to permit a man to seek divorce? Well, this takes us to the heart of the debate between the two major rabbinic schools of thought. For Rabbi Hillel, appropriate grounds for divorce included minor trivialities, like a wife burning her husband's dinner, while adultery was the only adequate reason for Rabbi Shammai.

Jesus sets out what appears like the strictest perspective of the lot, drawing on the creation narratives of Genesis to claim that divorcing effectively rips apart what God joined together (10:6 – 9). Yet, Jesus was not seeking to consign others to misery in loveless and abusive marriages. Rather, he was looking to protect women, in a context in which some men treated them as items of property to be discarded. In other words, he was consciously aligning himself with people who found themselves pushed to the margins of society by the ways that it worked. The point is reinforced by his care for young children after giving his disciples a private explanation of his thinking (10:13 – 16). When they sought to stop another group lacking status in that world coming to him, Jesus rebuked them, and made it clear that receiving the Kingdom of God is to be done in the same way that we need to welcome such a child. He was thus modelling God's care for people on the margins, just as we are called to do today in our own context, while taking seriously how vastly different the society in which we're doing this is to that of first-century Judea.

Having prepared many couples for marriage, I can honestly say that nobody goes into such a union expecting it to end in divorce, despite what some might insist when they claim that it is too easy to dismiss the commitments made when exchanging vows and rings. Marriage is understood by the Church as a lifelong commitment, but we must and do recognise that real life doesn't always work out in ideal terms and things do sometimes go wrong. As the child of a woman whose first marriage failed, and someone who ended up being baptised in a Methodist chapel because the Church of England turned my mum away, I am strongly of the view that compassion must shape Church responses to divorce. We must not continue to shape passages like that of today into 'texts of terror', out of a spirit of judgement. Divorce will never be a straightforward or non-emotive subject, but we need to respond well to those who experience it, if we are to model God's love in these situations. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**