



Sermon on 18th Sunday after Trinity 2021 | Reverend Canon Stan Evans

This is one of those Sundays which it would be easier to move away from the set readings and find a more comfortable Gospel on which to preach. On this Sunday in years past I have witnessed tearful women leave the Church service never to return because of how the issues of marital breakdown and divorce were handled.

So please do not get up and walk out – as I am not going to opt out of the challenge. Far too often in the Church we would rather sweep the difficulties under the carpet. That helps no-one.

Today, it may appear, many are on the side of the Pharisees on the question of divorce. While the laws may be different today, we live in a society where divorce is common. Churches and individual Christians take various views regarding divorce, but most of us accept it as a reality. Our laws and our customs, like those of the Pharisees in the Gospel story, assume that divorce happens. But here Christ appears to take a hard, uncompromising view of divorce. He says it is wrong, rooted in our sinfulness.

And that leaves us with a problem.

It is easy to think that the Adam and Eve story is about men and women since those are the characters in the story. But is that story not truly really about individuals and families, about life together than to live life alone, and not that men are superior to women?



Marriage is a relationship that works on the principle of self-giving when all our instincts are self-serving – so, is it counter-intuitive, or is it part of the natural order?

The truth is that in many marriages life together becomes a gift that is more than we can handle. Marriages get stale or toxic, angry or depressed. Relationships can dry up or lose focus, self-destruct, or break down under pressure. Things go wrong for far too many reasons.

A divorce is a burial for a dead marriage. Divorces do not kill marriages any more than funerals kill people. Although, one of the great tragedies today is that far too many couples are burying their relationship when it is only sick or injured. It needs to be worked at – no matter how tough it may seem.

But is it not possible that our promise to be together until death can refer to the death of the relationship as well as the death of the person?

Is it not possible to recall that the original intent of our loving and caring God, who gave us the gift of marriage, was to make our lives better?

Does that desire of God evaporate when we are no longer in a marriage?

Sometimes it is better not to avoid these difficult passages in our lectionary readings. If we fail to wrestle with the difficult passages, not only can we not expect people to do it themselves, but they may also think that we are shallow in our preaching,



and we may even find that once we start choosing passages that we find easy for ourselves we start making God in our own image and likeness rather than seeking to be shaped in the image and likeness of God.

From the opening of this story, it is clear that the Pharisees are not seeking Christ's wisdom. Instead, they are seeking a way to entrap him. But marriage is not a matter of expediency in which the wife is the property of the husband.

But what does all this mean for us today?

Of course, the covenant of marriage is still just as valid today. Ideally, when two people marry, they commit themselves to each other in an exclusive relationship of love and devotion to a new entity.

But that is easier to say than it is to face up to reality, which includes the complexity of child-rearing, careers and competing religious, social and economic claims and responsibilities.

Ideally, we are to live in loving and committed relationships. In an ideal world, there would be no such things as divorce. But we do not live in an ideal world. We live in a fallen and broken world in which human nature always falls short of the glory of God. Whether we like it or not, divorce is a reality and we have to live with it.

Despite the best efforts of the best people, marriages fail, for any number of reasons, and that is the reality of human nature. And so, divorce is not going to go away.



So many times, when people are facing into the pain and suffering of divorce, the church is the very last place they can turn to for help and understanding.

But divorce is like a death. It is the death of a relationship, and so people truly grieve, and they need sympathy and to be consoled. They do not need us to stand in judgement. Would you chastise someone who was grieving after the death of a family member?

Too often, in debates and conversations, passages of Scripture taken out of context, or one-sided interpretations of the tradition of the Church can be used to set a trap so that people are forced to accept only one standard or practice for the marriage in the world today.

Christ responds to those who seek to trap him by refusing to accept unquestioningly their interpretation of Scripture or Tradition. Instead, he challenges those around to think for themselves and to think with compassion.

Let us not use this reading to trap Jesus. And let us not use this reading to trap vulnerable, suffering and grieving people who remain open to loving and being loved. Instead, we should face questions about marriage and divorces, about who can be married and who can be divorced, as challenging issues that require us to think outside the box, without trying to trap Jesus or to trap those who are faced with honest questions about marriage and divorce.

As we do so – let us be a loving and compassionate church.

Amen