

Sermon preached 8th October 2006 - Law and Kingdom

In this sermon I want to talk about divorce, children, disability, the law and God. Just one of these would be sufficient for any number of sermons but to try to cover all of them is impossible. So why try. Well first because I am sufficiently pigheaded to preach about a delicate subject like divorce when lots of my ministerial colleagues this week advised against it; secondly because I think today's reading illustrates something which is at the core of our understanding of the gospel and third because Sue Ball, who will be doing prayers this morning kindly pointed out that this is Disability Sunday – more of that later.

There are two parts to the gospel passage you just heard read. In the first part, the Pharisees who are trying to catch him out (as is often the case) and reveal him as a teacher – a rabbi – who does not know his Law, confront Jesus. Following that confrontation there is a much gentler scene – with Jesus demanding that the children stay in his company and teaching that the Kingdom of God belongs to them. Save for the fact that both parts have a connection with family life there seems little reason why one should follow the other – why did Mark follow a discussion about the law on divorce with his picture of Jesus and the children? In this sermon I want to suggest a connection that may not seem obvious at first but which I believe will help us understand both parts.

So to the difficult bit – the bit that some of my fellow ministers in this town are avoiding preaching about like the plague - the passage on divorce. It is very important that we start with what this passage is NOT. It is not - and this is highly significant – it is not pastoral advice. Jesus is not counselling a man and wife who have fallen out of love – or a middle-aged couple who come to see him to ask whether they can be married again. This is not the situation that Jesus is addressing at this moment.

What is happening is that the Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus out again – they are “testing” him – because they want to convict him out of his own mouth. They want evidence so that they can condemn him and what they use is the intricacies of the Law of the Jews – what we call the Mosaic Law. But Jesus knows their game – he is not stupid – he realises that in order to survive in this environment he needs to go right back to first principles. The intention of God in creation, he says, is that in marriage, two should be one and should be so for ever. The stark reality of that means that the Pharisees cannot complain – the Law is the Law - and so they are foiled in their devious plans. It seems that the people who are worried by this is are the disciples who react rather like John McEnroe – “you cannot be serious”. Jesus not for the first time has to spell it out for them.

But when the scene moves on – the disciples are in trouble again. This time they try to keep the children away from Jesus. It is an understandable plan because they wish to protect him from those who are of little significance to what they see as the important things of life. But they get it wrong again. Jesus sees children in a very different light. To him they are not the worthless members of society but the very

essence of the Kingdom of God – indeed that Kingdom Jesus claims belongs to such as these.

In the first part, it is the interpretation of the Law that is the key to the argument; in the second part, it is nothing to do with Law but all to do with the Kingdom of God. And I think Mark puts these two parts together because he wants to make a distinction between what the Pharisees see as being central to a spiritual life – to a life of discipleship – and what Jesus teaches. The Pharisees cannot see beyond a strict adherence to the law – Jesus sees it in terms not of law but of relationship. St Mark is showing us that Jesus while taking seriously what the law might offer shows by his acceptance and care for the children that God is much more concerned with how we relate to each other and how we treat the least in our community than how we might order our common life.

I want to illustrate this from a very different perspective – that of disability. We are all very aware of the regulations and laws that have been passed in the last few years which try to make access to public places easier for people with disabilities. You have a good example of that behind you where we are creating a toilet that will accommodate wheelchair users. So the law is doing an important job in making disabled people more able to be part of our society. That is good law.

But what is more important for people with disabilities is the way we treat them. What they want is to be treated in a way that means they can develop normal relationships with others. And that means a change in our attitude to them. These are people who will need acceptance, friendship and love as any other person – people who will want to be able to enter freely into a community and be an accepted part of it. Changes in the law can only do a certain amount – what is needed is a change in our attitudes. In a word, the law is important but relationships mean so much more.

What Jesus did (and this comes out very strongly in St. Paul's writings) is not to say that the law is wrong – but that the things of the Kingdom of God are so much more important. And as we know that kingdom is one that is based on the paramount Christian virtue of love and has our relationship with God and with each other at its very centre.

So it is then that we as Christians, while we respect the law and what that teaches, place a greater emphasis on love and on relationships. And that is why we can accept the fact that two people might fall out of love and want to find hope in a new relationship. And why we should be like children who often have little understanding of law but know what it is to love unconditionally. And why it is important that as a society we should enable all people, with or without disability, to find personal fulfilment in normal relationships with others. The words of Jesus need to be our constant reminder : the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these