
Hymns: **152** **“This is the day that the Lord has made”**
 503 **“Love divine, all loves excelling”**
 566 **“Take my life and let it be”**
 51 **“Great is thy faithfulness”**

Readings: **Psalm 8**
 Mark 10: 2-16

“DIVORCE”

Very little polarises opinion between Margaret and me more than rugby. She is an inveterate England supporter and she’s had to endure the deeply depressing experience of seeing all her children (and now her grandchildren) turn into Welsh dragons. When England play Wales it gets very fractious, the air gets red-hot around my chair and icy-cold around Margaret’s. But nothing we’ve ever experienced could match last night’s experience. Margaret, as usual, was urging the white-shirted, rose-red, scions of England on and I, wretched traitor to all that’s decent, was willing the Wallabies, the golden-shirted Australian team, to victory. Why? Because that’s what would ensure that my beloved Wales would go through to the knock-out stages of the World Cup, that’s why. But, I have to admit, it was the act of a badly brought up schoolboy to demonstrate my hopes for England’s downfall quite as vociferously as I did. I heard the word “divorce” in the air. Thankfully, as usual, we made things up and retired to bed the best of friends. But just for a moment.....I heard the dreaded word.

Divorce is exactly what we have to discuss this morning and, I confess, I’ve been dreading it all week. It’s one of those subjects that lends itself to misunderstanding. And with young couples like Emmanuel and Megan, Elvis and Lisa, in church and so many others who’ve only recently made their marriage promises here, to say nothing of others who’ve had to travel down the rocky road towards divorce with all the pain it brings, it’s a subject I’d prefer to avoid. Throughout my time as a preacher, I’ve been happy to skip these verses from Mark’s gospel and replace them with something more benign, something anodyne, something sweetly saccharine. So today will be a first – I’m going to dive in. But let me make a solemn promise before I begin.

I shall never forget the occasion when I invited a famous international church leader to preach from this pulpit. He was a nice enough man but my heart sank when it became obvious he wanted to use the occasion to preach about the wickedness (as he saw it) of people co-habiting, living together, before marriage. His words were dire, it was a fire and brimstone moment, and I shuddered. I looked around and could see people I knew, including our number one son, who qualified for this preacher’s ire. He was living very happily, very happily indeed, with his beloved. At that time, even if they’d wanted to, they couldn’t have afforded to marry. Our son was filled with indignation and refused to come to church for years after sitting through that bilious outburst. No. I shall not be treating the subject of divorce in that way – not at all. How could I? I am the son of a divorced couple and two of my children

have undergone divorce. I know at first hand the pain and the sorrow that the breakdown of a relationship can bring. And I also know the cruelty that can exist in a relationship that simply doesn't work, a union that imprisons two people within its clutches and dooms them to untold agonies and outbursts and dangers too. How will I ever forget my father's drunken violence and my mother's screams for mercy as he raved and shouted at her and threatened her with his fists?

So, with all that said, let's take our first look at the scripture. I confess that, at first hearing, it does seem so open and shut. There doesn't appear to be much wriggle room. Two people become one flesh. No one should dare to separate what God joins together. Remarriage invariably involves adultery. Marriage is indissoluble. And that's that. As I say – there's a flavour of "take that" about these words. You can't play around with them. They are hard-wired into the narrative. They are not weasel words, there's nothing slippery about them, they can't be explained away.

The Churches have wrestled with this question for years, some longer than others. The Roman Catholic Church has never wavered in its refusal to compromise on the question of the indissolubility of marriage and this will be the subject of passionate debate in the Synod of Bishops which is beginning this very day in Rome. Divorcees are refused communion and remarriage lies beyond the bounds of possibility. It is interesting to note, however, how Rome has in practice made use of the law of nullity. If it can be proved that there are reasonable grounds for believing that what seemed to be a marriage was never a marriage at all, then the whole thing could be nullified and, bob's your uncle, the table is wiped clean and you can begin all over again from the beginning. For many years, the Church of England held similar views. Margaret and Denis Thatcher were married here in 1954 because Denis was a divorcee and thus it was impossible for him to marry in his parish church. I might add that our oldest son, just three years ago, suffered a similar judgement.

We Methodists have been more accommodating. Drawing on a declaration on "The Christian view of Marriage and the Family" passed by our Conference in 1937, a more nuanced view of marriage began to emerge. Let me quote from a 1945 Conference document that put things very succinctly:

Christians have to recognize that many marriages have been contracted with imperfect or even base intention, and with little understanding of the true nature of marriage, and even when a union has begun on a high basis of the ideal, human ignorance, folly, frailty, or passion might break it down. There are courses of conduct which so violate the pledges and obligations of marriage that they destroy it as a union of heart and soul, and in such cases marriage ceases to be what it was intended to be.

This position was being established just as my parents' marriage was breaking down. My mother was referred to as "the guilty party" and then given seven days to leave my father's house with her two children. The stigma of divorce was palpable in those days and my mother's refusal to have anything to do with the church rested largely on Christian teaching as it prevailed in those days. The pragmatism of the Methodist Church was widely criticised by other churches and even from within its own ranks. But this has softened appreciably over the years.

So much for Church teaching; it's time to get back to the scripture. For there's a very important fact we've not yet noted. The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees was simple enough: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus replies, as he often did, with another question: "What did Moses command you?" and they, in turn, referred to the way that the law of Moses allowed a man simply to write a certificate of dismissal and, in this peremptory way, to divorce his wife.

Jesus seized on this reply and reminded his listeners that God's original intention was that those he'd created should enjoy a total union, a togetherness that saw two people become one flesh – a statement of God's will that's spelled out in the Book of Genesis. By the time of Moses, hundreds of years later, marriage had become less of a sacramental union, more a matter of business. The woman was given to the man, she became his property. And he could get rid of her when it pleased him, even (according to one rabbinic tradition) if she raised her voice or turned out to be a bad cook. Divorce had become a joke by the time of Moses and his law, the one quoted in this morning's passage, was formulated to tidy up lax practice and, a very important extra, to give women their full rights within the marriage relationship.

When Jennifer or I prepare people for marriage, we need to be convinced of one over-riding thing – that the couple in front of us understand and mean the promises they make. This applies to couples where each member is marrying for the first time and also to those where one (or both) have been married before. We recognize that all kinds of things, things unforeseen and unforeseeable on the day of the wedding, can blow a relationship off course. We'll do anything and everything we can to bring about reconciliation. We remember that those promises were made "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health." But we also remember that they were made by fragile human beings. At the height of Princess Diana's great crisis, Cardinal Basil Hume was asked what he made of her. "A flawed human being," he replied and added, "just like the rest of us." We are all capable of making mistakes. Our noblest ideals sometimes crumble to dust. Our best intentions can so easily be shattered. Are we to give up on life if that happens? Is there no hope? Are we doomed to be judged by the Church as failures, reprobates, pathetic creatures at such times in our lives? Not at all.

For there is the concept of the second chance. Of renewed hope. Of redemption. And who, pray, is the greatest champion of the second chance? Why none other than the man whose words on divorce we have been considering this morning – Jesus of Nazareth. He brought so many people back into the mainstream of life, giving them once again their dignity and their sense of purpose, that I cannot for one moment believe that he wouldn't bless a couple, even a couple who'd made a complete mess of their lives, with his genial smile and his ready invitation to give everything another go. It's his unfailing love that makes me love him as I do. I simply cannot conceive of him rejecting anyone who stands at his door and knocks. "Come in," he says, "whoever you are and whatever has happened to you."

A modern-day version of the play *Medea* by Euripedes has just opened at the Almeida Theatre, our local playhouse. Its author Rachel Cusk was the subject of a full page article in yesterday's newspaper. The play's plot is well known. Jason and Medea have a bitter quarrel. He leaves the relationship. Tragedy ensues and its climax, watered down we're told in the current version, comes when the afflicted

Medea kills her children before she's taken up in a chariot to some heavenly haunt. Rachel Cusk is clear – the play is about divorce. She feels there's been a taboo, “a moral cynicism” even, about the subject for too long. A couple is shown fighting “and fighting is an eternal human predicament. Love turning to hate, it's like splitting the atom, such destructiveness comes of it.”

Euripedes wrote his play 2,500 years ago. The breakdown of a relationship leads to outcomes that are deeply tragic. Jesus taught 2,000 years ago. Whilst teaching a very high doctrine of marriage and refusing to contemplate quick divorce, his ministry constantly points to outcomes that are deeply fulfilling. Divorce will always be painful but it need not always lead to tragedy. There can be life after the death of a relationship. Indeed, there are people here today who can testify to that fact.

May God be glorified in them and in all of us.

Amen.