

Brancepeth Sermon: What are we made for?

19th Sunday after Trinity

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Genesis 2:18–24; Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:5–12; Mark 10:2–16.

Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always. Amen

I'm afraid I couldn't think of a gentle or funny way
to begin this week's sermon.

We've just heard Jesus condemning divorce,
and saying that those who divorce and remarry
– a group that includes various members of my family
and several close friends –
well, that they are adulterers.

I didn't think I could just leave that there, undiscussed.

So, let's look more closely at that Mark passage.

Jesus says that people who marry
have been joined together *by God their creator*;
and because *God* has joined together
human beings *can't* pull them apart.

It sounds like there really is no such thing as divorce,
in God's eyes.

It's pretty blunt.

It's not quite so blunt in the equivalent passage in Matthew.

You know that the Gospel writers
each tell the same overall story,
and have their own versions
of many of the same incidents.

Well, in Matthew's version of this particular story,
Jesus says that there's really no such thing as divorce
except in cases of 'unchastity' –

so, if your partner cheats on you,
and joins themselves to someone else, you are free –
their behaviour *has* pulled apart
what God had joined together.

Now, as Christians have, over the years,
lived with these passages,
they have not stopped there.

They have recognised that there are other ways, too,
in which a marriage *can* be pulled apart,
even though the couple were joined together by God.

Saying that makes it sound like the church has simply
found Jesus' teaching too harsh,
and has given in to the temptation to weaken it.

But I don't think that's what's going on.

And here's why.

Look at the key line in our passage from Mark.

‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another
commits adultery *against her*’ – that is, against his *wife*.

Jesus doesn’t say that such a person

‘commits adultery *in the eyes of God*’;

he doesn’t say that such a person

‘offends against the principles, the laws

that God has established’;

no, he says, ‘he offends *against her*’.

He does something against *his wife*.

Jesus is, if we’re listening closely,

concerned with *who gets harmed*.

If we were to say to a couple,

‘Look, God joined you two together,

and so you’re stuck with each other for ever,

whether you like it or not –

and *whatever* harm it is doing to you!’,

well, we would not be doing justice to this teaching.

Let me give you an analogy.

When Jesus, elsewhere in Mark,

is teaching about the Sabbath,

another controversy between him and the Pharisees,

he says ‘The sabbath was made for humankind,

and not humankind for the sabbath’.

Keeping the sabbath matters, he’s saying,

but it’s not meant to be observed in such a way

as to harm people. It’s meant to be *for their good*.

I think we could say the same here:

‘Marriage was made for humankind,

not humankind for marriage’ –

Keeping a marriage intact matters,

but we’re not meant to focus on keeping it intact

so tenaciously that we end up harming the people involved.

Marriage is meant to be *for their good*

So, we might understand Jesus as saying

‘You can’t simply walk away from your wife or your husband,
you can’t abandon them because it suits you,
you can’t treat this relationship between you
as a matter of convenience
or as something to stick with only as long
as *you* get something out of it.

You can’t treat your partner as one of your possessions,
to dispose of whenever it suits you.

No. You have an obligation, a deep obligation,
an obligation laid on you by God,
an obligation to consider the welfare of your partner –
to live and work for *their* good as well as your own.

They are now your business, and you are their business
whether you like it or not.

And that obligation doesn’t disappear
just because you have changed your mind.’

And all that is important, and right.

But if we turn that teaching into an abstract principle,
one to apply without regard to the people involved
it can itself become harmful.

So if we say to people that they *have* to stay in marriages
which have become toxic to both partners,
or in marriages where
one of the people involved has already betrayed the bond
by treating their spouse as a possession
rather than as a partner –
if we say that they *have* to stay together
simply because *that's God's law* –
well, then we're making the rule
more important than the people.

That's not following Jesus' teaching;
it's betraying it.

But there is also something deeper than that
going on here as well.

Because, despite what I have just said,
there *is* a sense in which humankind
was made for marriage.

Now, I need straight away to qualify this very carefully.

I am *not* saying that
everyone was made for marriage,

I am *not* saying that there is *anything* wrong or lacking
or second-best in God's eyes
about singleness or about celibacy.

Not at all.

So what *am* I trying to say?

Well, Jesus, quoting Genesis, says

‘from the beginning of creation,

“God made them male and female.”

“For this reason a man shall
leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.”

If we say to a person getting married:
from now on, you have an obligation
to consider the welfare of your partner;
you have an obligation to live and work
for their good as well as your own –
we are not imposing an unnatural duty on them.

No. Human beings are *made* for relationship.

Human beings are *made* to live in ways
where each person’s own flourishing
is bound up with the flourishing
of those around them.

Human beings are *made* for mutual support,
mutual encouragement, mutual concern.

Human beings are *made* for love.

And marriage is *one* way in which that is made concrete.

So the obligations involved in marriage,
the promises, the commitment,
the way that your welfare and your partner's welfare
become completely entangled and inseparable –
that's not unnatural, it's not an imposition;
it's a way of being true to the way you were made.

Because *you were made for love*.

In that sense, marriage *is* something that we are made for.

Of course, marriage is only *one* of the ways
in which we can live out
the love for which we were all made,
and marriage is really not for everyone.

We are *all* made for love.

We are *all* made to live with and for others.

We are *all* made to grow alongside others,

and with others' help,

and to help others grow.

But there are all sorts of ways of living that out.

We can learn to live out

the love for which we were made

in community life,

in lives of service to others,

in friendships,

in the work of caring and in being cared for,

and in all sorts of other ways –

and the mix of these will be different for every person.

Those for whom marriage *is* part of the mix

don't have a head start or a fast track to growth:

they simply have a particular set of possibilities
and a particular set of temptations to work with
as they learn to grow deeper into love.

But we are *all* –
married or single or divorced or widowed or engaged –
called to grow deeper into love,
because love is what we are *all* made for.

And, that, finally, means I can get
to the passage from Hebrews.

Because *Jesus* lives a life that embodies love;
he lives a life shot through with love,
a life transparent to love.

He lives as we were all made to live,
as we are all *meant* to live – but don't.

Jesus lives out in our loveless world the love of God,
the love that is God's own life.

That's what it means to say,
as the author to Hebrews says,
that Jesus 'is the reflection of God's glory
and the exact imprint of God's very being'.

Jesus unstintingly, unfailingly
lives the love of God out in a loveless world –
he never turns aside from love,
even when the world turns against him for it.

That's why Hebrews calls him
the 'pioneer of our salvation' –
the one who leads the way,
who shows the way,
into the life for which we were made,
the life that God has prepared for us.

Jesus lived out the love for which we are *all* made,
and he beckons us to join him.

He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters,
Hebrews says – but calls us into his family,
to live out the same love that he lives.

We are made for *that* love;
we are made for *Christlike* love –
and it is only in such love that we become who
we were always made to be.

That's the deepest truth about us.

And that is the big story of which marriage is a small part.

It's not that marriages can't end.

It's not that divorce isn't sometimes

the lesser of two evils,

and so the best thing for everyone in the circumstances.

We can be realists about all of that.

But, when it works as it should,
marriage can be *one* fallible and partial way of living out
the love to which we are *all* called:
a love that involves a reckless
commitment to one another,
a love that trusts that we can flourish more deeply
together than we can on our own,
a love that promises to be there for one another
and holds on to that promise *come what may*,
a love that is hard to learn and hard to stick to,
a love at which we sometimes fail,
but at the same time
the most natural thing in the world,
because the God of all creation,
the God of Jesus Christ,
made us all for love like that.

Amen