

## **“Marriage and divorce”**

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - 4 October 2009

Mark 10:2-16

Today's gospel reading leaves a preacher with little choice but to focus on Christian teaching about marriage and divorce - tricky and sensitive as that is. So this morning I want to attempt to sum up the Uniting Church's understanding of marriage and divorce in hopefully less than 15 minutes, including a necessary word or two about singleness and about homosexuality - and acknowledging there's no way of covering all that could and should be said on such complex issues in one mere sermon.

Let me also say at the outset that if anything in this sermon causes you raised eyebrows or makes you hot under the collar or kicks off a lurch in your heart, then please speak with me afterwards or contact me during the week. I'll be speaking shorthand at many points, when there's lots more could be said.

So, let me speak first about Christian marriage, then on divorce, then briefly on singleness and on homosexuality, and at the end bring it all together, I trust, as part of the good news brought to us by Jesus Christ. And I'll be referring frequently to the paper you've received which provides two key Uniting Church statements about marriage (*attached below*).

### **Marriage**

The first thing to say is that Jesus and every generation of the church since Jesus have a very high view of marriage. In our reading from Mark's gospel today Jesus refers to marriage as part of the order of God's creation, and he strongly affirms the sexual union of a husband and wife as part of God's plan for humankind.

In the Uniting Church wedding service this high view of marriage is stated very clearly in the Declaration of Purpose. Note the first line "Marriage is a gift of God and a means of grace". This is saying nothing less than that God's love and joy can be experienced and understood and known better and better through the love and intimacy shared by a married couple. The 1997 Uniting Church statement refers to "the sanctity of marriage", that it is a holy state of relationship which is to be deeply respected and held inviolable. And again, the marriage service and the church statement on marriage follow Jesus in referring to the centrality of sexual union within marriage whereby husband and wife can "express mutual delight, pleasure and tenderness". And the gift of children through marriage is honoured and referred to as supplying a firm foundation for human society.

There are important differences between the understanding of marriage in Jesus' time and our understanding of marriage today. In Jesus' time the models of marriage they knew from Old Testament times were not very uplifting, for in the Old Testament there's lots of polygamy, there are concubines and harems, there are female slaves treated as sex objects, there's quite a deal of adultery and unfaithfulness and there's very easy divorce for men. It's this male dominance in marriage that has changed vastly for us in the past century, and very rightly so. Notice how our marriage service and the church statement on marriage take equality of husband and wife as a given, it's a mutual partnership, it's for the enrichment and love and companionship of both husband and wife.

I've had the pleasure of conducting weddings over nearly 40 years of ministry. Only once have I had a wedding couple who wanted to use the old-fashioned bridal vow of "love, honour and obey". Our understanding of the nature of the relationship between husband and wife has changed greatly in recent decades.

### **Divorce**

The Old Testament provides in Deuteronomy 24 that a man can divorce his wife simply by issuing her with a certificate of divorce and sending her away. The only reason he needs is that she does not please him "because he finds something objectionable about her". In Jesus' day there was an emerging school of thought that the "something objectionable" had to be adultery although the majority opinion was still that it could be anything. So it's no surprise that Jesus is asked for his opinion.

In effect Jesus' answer is that God does not countenance divorce. It's only allowed for, says Jesus, because of male hardness of heart, because men are unwilling to make a marriage work. He even goes on to say that remarriage is tantamount to adultery. It's very tough teaching.

It needs to be noted that many in the early church found this to be tough teaching too. In Matthew's version of the same teaching Jesus allows for divorce in situations of the woman's adultery. Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, seems to countenance divorce while actually saying it would be better if everyone remained unmarried. All this of course is in the context of a culture of all-powerful male dominance and when Christians, perhaps even Jesus himself, were expecting the end of the world within a generation.

In the 2000 years of church history since, many churches have stuck literally to this teaching of Jesus. They've banned divorce and remarriage, although some have allowed for a new marriage by making contrived and tortuous provisions for the retrospective non-recognition of a failed marriage, often called annulment. Protestant churches such as ours have taken the view that despite all the best intentions some marriages will fail, that the Scriptures overall are ambiguous about divorce, and that Jesus, above all else, is concerned with the wellbeing of people, a concern that realistically means divorce must be allowed for, and remarriage. So the Uniting Church's 1997 statement on marriage goes on, albeit with rather careful language, to allow for separation, divorce and remarriage.

### **A word on singleness**

Even though the church takes a high view of marriage, it also acknowledges that many people never marry - either deliberately deciding that marriage is not for them, or more often simply finding that the opportunity for the commitment of marriage never arises. We need immediately to acknowledge that single people, in God's eyes, are of no less status than married people, and that single people are loved by God just as much as married people. Knowing God's love in our lives does not depend on being married. Knowing God's purpose for our lives does not depend on being married. God's purposes for human life involve loving God and loving neighbour, following the self-giving servant way of Christ, using the talents God has given us, seeking justice and peace for the world, living with compassion and with joy - and none of those mean you must be married. Jesus himself was not married.

### **And a word on homosexuality**

Some people will never contemplate marrying a person of the other gender because their innate orientation is towards people of the same sex. It's taken us centuries to work out, but we now know that heterosexuality or homosexuality is not a matter of

choice but is somehow or another a prenatal given, and neither mother or father or the baby can do anything about it. The church's understanding of marriage is very clearly that it is between a man and a woman, so in Christian terms marriage is not something open to a homosexual.

However, we must immediately say here too that homosexual people, in God's eyes, are of no less status than married people and homosexual people are loved by God just as much as heterosexual people. The church across the world is still working out what sort of recognition and what sort of Christian ceremony should be rightly provided for the lifelong committed partnerships of two homosexual people. Ceremonies of recognition are now provided by churches in Scandinavia, Holland, Canada and the USA. While other churches, such as our own, are not moving fast on these issues, they are moving, I'm sure change is coming.

### **And the last word**

Perhaps it's no accident that immediately following Jesus' tough teaching about divorce and adultery, there's the incident of Jesus welcoming the children and stating very clearly that children belong in the kingdom of God. Here we have Jesus going far beyond the culture of his time by including children as people worthy of attention and recipients of God's love, and presenting a very inclusive picture of the grace and love of God.

It's fitting that today we celebrate Communion. All baptised people, all who have even the smallest seed of faith, all who want to receive the love of God for themselves, whether married, separated, divorced, widowed, single, homosexual, heterosexual, whether young or mature, whether drop-down gorgeous or plum ugly, whether an Eels supporter or a Storm supporter, all are loved by God and all are welcome at the table of our Lord. We know that from Jesus. That is the good news - God loves us all, and he wants us all to receive his love and for us to live in love with and for others.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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### **DECLARATION OF PURPOSE, FROM THE MARRIAGE SERVICE OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA**

Marriage is a gift of God and a means of grace.  
In the life-long union of marriage we can know the joy of God,  
in whose image we are made, male and female.

Marriage is founded in God's loving nature,  
and in the covenant of love made with us in Christ.  
Husband and wife, in giving themselves to each other in love,  
reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In Christian marriage, wife and husband are called  
to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect,  
tenderness and delight. The companionship and comfort of marriage  
enables the full expression of physical love between husband and wife.

They share the life of a home and may be entrusted  
with the gift and care of children. They help to shape a society  
in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

Marriage is a way of life that all people should honour;  
it is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly,

but responsibly and in the love of God.

N and N are now to begin this way of life  
that God has created and Christ has blessed.  
Therefore, on this their wedding day,  
we pray that they may fulfil God's purpose  
for the whole of their lives.

*From Uniting in Worship 2, 2005*

## **UNITING CHURCH STATEMENT ON MARRIAGE**

### **1. Marriage**

Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful lifelong union of a woman and man expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage the man and the woman seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship.

In the marriage service

- the woman and man make a public covenant with each other and with God, in the company of family and friends;
- the couple affirm their trust in each other and in God;
- the Church affirms the sanctity of marriage and nurtures those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage and calls upon all people to support, uphold and nurture those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage.

Where sexual union takes place the partners seek to express mutual delight, pleasure and tenderness, thus strengthening the union of their lives together.

In marriage, children may be born and are to be brought up in love and security, thus providing a firm foundation for society.

### **2. Separation, Divorce and Re-marriage**

- An inability to sustain the marriage relationship breaks the commitment to be together for life and may be painful for the couple, the children in their care, as well as for parents, friends and the Church community.
- In cases of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the Church acknowledges that divorce may be the only creative and life-giving direction to take.
- The Church has a responsibility to:
  - (a) care for people, including children, through the trauma of the ending of a marriage;
  - (b) help people where appropriate to grieve, repent, grow in self-understanding, receive affirmation, grace and forgiveness;
  - (c) support them as they hear God's call for new life.
- The grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again.

*Adopted by the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1997*