

Pentecost 19
7/10/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Job 7:1-1, 2:1-10

Psalm 26

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Mark 10: 2-16

Sermon preached by Rev Lauren Mosso

Today's Gospel reading is about marriage, but more specifically it is about ethical relationships - relationships of mutuality and trust where no one is exploited – and about the way God graciously welcomes us into relationship with open arms through the saving work of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit who gently leads us there. Of course the original model for ethical relationships is the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit where difference holds together in a relationship of perfect love so that the three become one God.

There are some familiar parts to today's story. It's there in Matthew's Gospel, right around Mt 18 the dispute resolution part, and we have been hearing about children, or 'little ones', in Mark's Gospel for three weeks in a row.

When the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest, Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," and takes a child as an illustration.¹ And as we heard last week, when the disciples are challenging someone who is casting out demons, Jesus counsels them against putting 'a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me.'² And today the Pharisees are engaging Jesus in a dispute about the grounds for divorce, when Jesus changes the game and says that it's not about grounds for divorce but rather about ethical relationships – well he doesn't use those words exactly – and then he illustrates the point by welcoming children, 'for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'³

In the ancient world children were at the bottom of the society, along with slaves, and were not considered to be full people in their own right. So each time the subject of children is raised it's a 'game-changer' – it points to the very different way of living that is 'the kingdom of God'.

The Pharisees in today's Gospel story are running an idea up the flagpole – which side of their current debate is Jesus going to support? Will he take the side of the ones who are fairly liberal in the reasons why a man might be allowed to divorce his wife – say the Biblical equivalent of burning the roast? Or will he take the side that says that the only ground for divorce is adultery? They are seeking controversy, and maybe they are trying to get Jesus in trouble with the Roman authorities, the Jewish authorities, or both. They don't seem to care at all about the people who might be affected by their deliberations. The issue of divorce was one that would have a serious impact on a woman's standing in the community, in Jewish law, as only men could initiate a divorce. It was a social justice issue.

¹ Mark 9:33-37

² Mark 9:38-42

³ Mark 10:14

Jesus' response to the debate follows a different path from the one the Pharisees were expecting. He said that Moses was not encouraging divorce, but was trying to put some boundaries around it 'because of your hardness of heart' – stubbornness, the refusal to respect one another, an unethical way of treating each other, were problems in human relationships then as they still are now. Jesus offered a vision of marriage as an ethical relationship that is a gift from God, where the couple's commitment is to give up what they had before, and their separate status, in order to live together and care for each other. The relationship he describes is one of mutuality, commitment, and a just way of treating one another. The message is to stop haggling about reasons for a divorce and start concentrating on building healthy relationships and caring for one another.

Back inside the house with his disciples Jesus gives the rest of his answer, in order to teach them about ethical relationships. He speaks about divorce in a new way, reflecting the possibility that, at least in the Roman and 'gentile' world, a woman could also divorce her husband. The point was not to encourage divorce, but rather to encourage maintaining an ethical way of treating one another in a relationship. He seems to be speaking against ending one marriage in order to begin another, with all the 'collateral damage' this change would entail, and to be speaking for ethical relationships.

This point is then illustrated when Jesus invites the children to come to him. Here is the social justice revolution in Jesus' teaching – in the kingdom of God relationships are ethical relationships, and each person is as important as the next. All are created in the image of God, all are equally valued, and all are unconditionally loved by God. This is a very different model of human engagement with each other because it arises from a very different model for God engaging with us. In embracing the children, Jesus is embodying God's grace, which embraces each one of us. This is truly a 'game changer.' It is a message of liberation, and it is the message that we are called to live out as the church.

But the disciples have not understood Jesus' teaching about what the kingdom of God really is. They find the children to be a nuisance, and speak 'sternly' to them to send them away, asserting their rights under the old social pecking order.

Jesus is 'indignant' and tells them to 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.' By blessing the children and embracing them, Jesus is breaking all of the rules of the social pecking order and demonstrating in real life what the kingdom of God is like.

In describing the historical climate of the Markan community Prof. Brendan Byrne states that 'the widespread failure of institutional Christianity on many fronts has led disillusionment to enter into the heart of believers within once-vibrant but now deeply wounded Christian communities.'

I was struck by the way this statement seems to resonate with the church today.

Right now the church is under pressure, facing a huge amount of change, which sometimes results in situations of conflict and very bad behaviour. I'm speaking from the perspective of my work across the Synod, not about this congregation in particular. Sometimes power can be used in unethical ways that damage the church.

To add another challenge, the Victorian Inquiry into child abuse in the churches has raised awareness of the abuse which has occurred in all denominations, and ours is no exception. What happens to the faith of someone who has been abused within the church? What does it do to their understanding of God? And what happens to the faith of a whole community as they read about it in the papers most days?

But here is the ‘game-changer’ - Today’s Gospel reading invites us to wonder, what would the church look like if we were to follow Jesus’ teaching to ‘let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs’ ?

Jesus invites us into ethical relationships with one another, and into a different model for living so that we may engage in Christ’s mission with integrity.

The good news is that kingdom of God, and God’s transformative grace, are alive and well, and despite all of its problems, so is the church.

Some positive outcomes from the abuse crisis are that people are coming forward, sometimes after many decades, to tell the story of the abuse they have experienced and to have the veil of shame lifted, and to find help and healing. There is a new level of ecumenical co-operation in sharing prevention strategies and policies, and in working together to make the church a safer place for children and vulnerable adults. But the rebuilding of trust between the wider community and the church remains an uphill battle.

There is also a willingness to acknowledge that we need to learn better ways of handling conflict, and to work at maintaining ethical relationships when we disagree, although this is moving very slowly. But by God’s grace we also have a lot of faithful and dedicated people who are growing in their discipleship of the risen Lord every day, and who daily demonstrate their capacity to welcome all just as Jesus welcomed the little children.

The church needs to be a place of faith development, where anyone can come and explore the Christian faith, and maybe even find meaning in their suffering.

The kingdom of God is a gift from God – we cannot create it ourselves,⁴ but we receive it by God’s grace. It is not an easy road, as true grace comes at a significant cost.

But we are not alone. As the church we are all in this together, and we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to show us the way.⁵

May we continue to grow in our capacity to receive the grace we are offered, to bring this grace into all of our relationships, and to be a faithful witness to the transformative power of God’s grace, so that we might offer a glimpse of the kingdom of God in our life together. To the Holy Trinity of Love be all honour and glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.

⁴ Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 239.

⁵ Basis of Union, para 3