

Sunday 27
4/10/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 5:25-33

Psalm 100

Mark 10:2-16

Marriage and Divorce

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gallacher

A few months after we were married, a drowsy Sunday afternoon found me preaching at Tarnagulla. The reading was Ephesians 5. I was very much in love (for the record I still am) and so I launched into a lyrical account of marital bliss. Then I looked at the congregation, all seated in one pew. There were two ladies who had never married, two widows, a mature couple and Harry, the bell ringer who bore an uncanny resemblance to Quasimodo. Then it was that I realised what a minefield it is to preach about marriage, and I haven't done it since, until today.

Commentaries on these readings all give several pages about first century culture, as the sayings need to be considered in context. I'm going to skip that, and pick out a few salient points to develop.

When Jesus is quizzed about divorce, he goes behind the Law of Moses to God's purpose in creation. Now this is not an appeal to nature. It is tempting to say that the coming together of the two sexes to produce new life is a principle on which the whole creation is built, and so marriage is the most natural thing in the world. Well, we visited a fish farm and I learned that Barramundi are all born male, and remain so for five years and when most become female and breed. And David Attenborough will happily point you to a proliferation of other variations. An argument from nature is an argument for exceptions and diversity.

Jesus says, "From the beginning of creation, God made them, male and female, the two will become one flesh". That is, it is God's will or purpose that couples marry and become one. Now I am cautious about claiming to know God's will. I prefer to talk about a Biblical understanding, and to put Paul's teaching beside this saying of Jesus. "Husbands, treat your wives as your own body". That doesn't mean treat a woman as if she were a man. Rather, such is the intimate bonding, or uniting, that what a husband does to his wife he does in fact do it to himself. They are one. And I'm glad that both Jesus and Paul make that reciprocal.

Paul quotes "The two will become one flesh" and adds "this is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church". It is not clear if he means that the experience of marriage enables you to understand how Christ loves the church, or if Christ's love for the church sets the standard for marriage. But it is not lack of clarity that causes him to speak of "mystery". Mystery means that there is always more to something than you have so far discovered. So it is like running on two legs. The self-giving love experienced in marriage gives you a clue to the way Christ loves the church, especially the way Christ faithfully continues to love the church, even when it disappoints him. And when you appreciate the way Christ loves the church more deeply, your experience of marriage is broadened, and you become more forgiving. You venture into new territory. That in turn gives you a new insight into divine love, which in its turn opens new experiences in the human relationship, and so on without end. You are exploring a

mystery. Somehow, opening yourself to an “other” expands your own person, and that “other” can be human or divine.

Such is the ideal. But a lot of marriages do not work out like that, and so there is a place in law for divorce. However, be aware that since the bonding is so deep, the breaking of it is extremely hurtful. And if you rub salt into the open wound by taking another partner well Jesus says that’s adultery.

Is this the teaching of the Uniting Church? Start with the marriage service. It says that marriage is a gift of God, a means of grace, a life-long union in which you know the joy of God in whose image you are made. You live in the covenant of love that is made with us in Christ. There are another 10 points made in the statement of purpose, but that’s enough to show we are in the same ball park as the UCA liturgy. A discussion paper of marriage was presented to last Assembly. It is a commentary on the Marriage Service. I quote a couple of sentences from this 20 page document.

“The church believes that marriage is more than a cultural phenomenon or a social construct. Life-long covenantal union reflects God’s loving nature...”

“Divorce is never viewed as a part of God’s intention ... But nor is regarded as a sin ... It is a tragic consequence of the fallenness of human relationships.”

Then there is the President’s letter, written after Assembly, calling for a “space for grace”. He asks us to respect different views, realising we are an inclusive church reconciling both the Aboriginal Congress and the Gay and Lesbian community. Christ’s command is love one another, so the church will take another 3 years to listen to each other with our heart, and to the Holy Spirit who grants us understanding beyond human wisdom”.

The Assembly and the President are treading cautiously because marriage touches such deep emotions, and there is such a variety of views and experiences. Let me outline a few current trends that impinge on this stance. I have to be brief, so I’ll be blunt. It should give you plenty to talk about over lunch.

1. Marriage is not the only environment for developing a deeper relationship with God. But there are other relationships which can aid that spiritual journey. I was in a group once when a person argued that an individual is not complete without a marriage partner. You should have heard the two nuns in the group explode at that.
2. We live in a culture of generational change. I once conducted a group where I asked people to sketch their lives in the form of a tree. A 70 year old drew a stark black trunk with a single shoot emerging from the top. She explained that the shoot started the day her husband died. She told a story of living with an alcoholic, and cited many dreadful experiences. The three young wives present all said, “Why didn’t you leave?” She said, with dignity, “I married him for better or for worse, and I kept my vow!” They shook their heads.
3. While the Bible presents us with a profound understanding of the possibilities in marriage, it does not turn the ideal into a clear-cut law. For example, having stated God’s will in Genesis 2, chapter 3 presents the first family which is no model. Adam and Eve make a mess of things, and produce a son who is a murderer. Our understanding and practice has to deal with this discrepancy between ideal and reality compassionately.
4. A big struggle today is against individualism – cutting self off from relationship. It is being promoted as liberating and progressive. I wince when abortion is

promoted as “a woman’s right to take control of her own body” just as I frown when a billionaire says “It’s my money and I can do with it what I like”.

5. Add to this the power that technology is giving in support of self-centred individualism. Australian Story last Monday told of a woman who shunned partners for career, then, later, wanted a child so badly she paid \$30,000 to a clinic in San Diego to have a foetus implanted with which she had no genetic connection.
6. You will have noticed I have not mentioned gay marriage: My only comment is that this issue is big enough to break the relationship between church and state that we have here in Australia. Soon everyone will marry in a Registry Office and those who want their marriage solemnised will come to church as well.

Actually, it was because the debate about so called marriage equality is so superficial that I believe someone should be saying something about the godly nature of relationships and witnessing to what marriage can be. A romantic “We love each other” is not enough.

I leave you with some words plucked from “A Service of Blessing of a Civil Marriage” in Uniting in Worship 2. It says: This is a way of life which God has created and Christ has blessed. (Hence the picture on the cover of the OOS) May the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen you to love each other as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.
