Genesis 2: 18-24; Hebrews 1: 1-4; 2: 5-12; **Mark 10: 2-16**

 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But 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.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I officiated at a lovely lovely wedding yesterday afternoon. And I based my address, my sermonette, partly on the reading they chose - 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13, that famous passage on love being patient and kind and so on, and partly on the sentence, from the first letter of John: God is Love (hear it with capital G and capital L) God is Love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

SUCH a tricky gospel reading this morning. I don’t know who among you has suffered the pain of marriage break-up – and I don’t want to know unless you want to share it with me for whatever reason. But on the face of it, this gospel is hard to digest and looks very bleak. So we need to unpick it.

But bear with me if I go at it a bit round the houses, and think first about how good and evil impacts us as the Church. I heard the other day that a group of recently-ordained deacons in a diocese not far from here are doing a monthly training session as they settle in and grow into their new roles as curates. And the current one this weekend is on apologetics – how we ‘explain’ to non-Christians our understanding of the wider world. The origin of the word apologetics is Greek and means not ‘apologising for’, which would clearly be wrong, but speaking in defence of, which is much more robust.

The kind of question that often comes up as a stumbling block to faith and which we need to employ apologetics for might be, for example, the one about evil and suffering. From the outside, people often treat this as though it were one of the most important questions we have to engage with, but actually, maybe it’s not even the right question to be asking. If I might attempt to explain:

I said recently that Rowan Williams is one of my favourite, if frequently unfathomable, theologians, but what he says of this evil and suffering question is this: Why are we asking this particular question: how can there be a God of Love when there is so much evil and suffering in the world? Is it because we need to justify the idea of God to ourselves? And if it is because we need to justify the idea of God to ourselves, what kind of notion of God are we walking around with?

Because, although Jesus, Paul, Augustine and others all address the issue, it was never about justifying a particular idea of God to themselves or anyone.

Or, approaching it from the other direction: maybe the question we need to answer is actually the question of good (not evil/suffering). If we ask about the issue of evil, then we also need to ask about the issue of the good that we encounter, whether that be the goodness of the saints whose stories we are told or whether that be in the random people who cross our paths during the course of our lives. They are the ones who make us think ‘That’s what I want to be like’. The very existence of Good, the fact that we can call something ‘good’, or recognise something as good, itself speaks, for me, about the nature of God. So then that is what becomes the basis of being able to say, ‘This is the God we understand and believe in, the One from whom all good emanates.’

And via that we can see where the presence of Evil is, how the presence of evil relates to that, but that’s not the place we ought to start in terms of our understanding of God. There is a whole lot more to tease out of that one, but maybe on another occasion.

Now to the tricky question in today’s gospel………. Is it right for us to divorce. It is indeed only very recently that bishops in the Church of England were allowed to be in a divorced and remarried state. And each individual parish priest must take responsibility for the decision to marry – or not – a person who has been divorced and wishes to remarry in church.

So again, how do we ask the question the right way round? In that passage, what Jesus takes us to is actually the question: what is marriage for? What is it really about? What is the foundation of marriage? And I suspect we would all fundamentally agree about that. But there remains the question: what happens when that goes wrong? You will notice Jesus being very stern with the Pharisees, but necessarily stern, because they have got themselves into a self-justifying way of dispensing with a wife they did not want by simply signing a chit of paper. That’s how easy it was. And they’ve really forgotten about the relationships and the humanity at the core of why the law was there in the first place, which was as a sort of trellis to support that which was good. So as they often did, the Pharisees are really just trying to trip Jesus up; to see which side he’ll come down on so that either way they have him cornered.

But then crucially, I think, the passage continues with Jesus talking about the little children – here, the disciples themselves are being harsh and trying to prevent the children coming to Jesus, where the real point is: only if you can be like one of these children will you be able to enter the kingdom of God.

So all of that wrangling maybe boils down to a different question entirely: namely, how do we enter the kingdom of God? What do we have to let go of? How do we have to change in order to become people who are fit to enter God’s kingdom? And that is a question that we can ask regardless of our life circumstances, regardless of our domestic arrangements. That is the question that gets to the foundation of the relationship between us and God – which is the only one that needs to be asked.

**Amen**