



## **Any Questions' Sermon series**

### **Week 5: Marriage, Divorce and the Church**

This is a tricky one, not least because there is no specific question to answer in this week's 'Any Questions?' sermon series. So, I am assuming that the underlying question is something along the lines of 'What is the Church's understanding of Marriage and Divorce?'

#### **What is the Church's understanding of 'Marriage'?**

Marriage is a personal lifelong commitment to one another and a public commitment to building a life together in the community. Whether or not a marriage is solemnised in church, it is a way of life created by God as a gift. In marriage, the couple belong to each other so closely that the Bible can describe them as "one flesh". Because it is a life-long partnership, marriage is chosen in the bible to be a symbol of the love of God for us which is permanent, forgiving, and faithful and accompanies us through all the changing scenes of life. If you like, Marriage is one of the ways in which God reveals his love to the world – it's a 'copying' of what God is like and is why it is viewed as sacramental by many.

In the Church's historic understanding of marriage, it has been reserved for man and woman and not for couples of the same sex. However, in recent years, the legal definition has changed and gay men and women have been given the legal right to marry. Some, including some church denominations, have welcomed this move on the grounds of equality and liberty, and others have found the change unwelcome. As the law currently stands, the Church of England is not permitted to undertake same sex weddings or blessings but the legislation carries an 'opt-in' if in due course the Church of England changes its view.

In light of these legislative changes, the Church of England is having to re-examine its position and its interpretation of the Scriptures, as it has done on many issues over the years, most recently concerning the issue of the ordination of women as priests and bishops. The reality is that the legislation has changed what the church has previously understood as 'traditional' marriage and that means the church is required to think, talk and pray about what that means, if anything, for the Church now that we're in a different context to when that 'tradition' first began. Watch this space on that one!

But whatever your view, and in light of last week's sermon on tolerance and reconciliation, I'm sure you can agree that there is no place in the church, or in society, for homophobia of any kind whatsoever.

#### **What is the Church's understanding of Divorce?**

Since marriage implies a lifelong horizon, when it is cut short there is inevitably pain and emotional trauma, as anyone who has suffered the sad experience and emotional

scars can attest to. Others may be painfully affected too, especially children of a broken marriage. But it is always unwise for those outside the marriage to attempt to apportion blame and treat divorcees as second-class citizens, which I know from experience is how some have felt.

Jesus speaks about divorce in his dialogue with the Pharisees in Matthew 19. The Pharisees, who are obsessive about keeping 'rules and rituals', believing they earn God's approval, come trying to trap Jesus with a legal question about divorce.

There's a lot of background to their question. They want Jesus to comment on the interpretation of a verse in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) which was all about the circumstances in which a man was allowed to divorce his wife. There were different schools of thought and different rabbis taught different things. Some said, 'any reason' (including bad cooking) and others said sexual infidelity only.

The Pharisees know that the Old Testament law permits divorce; what they want to know from Jesus is, 'When is it OK to divorce your wife? Under what circumstances?'

Divorce is clearly a difficult and sensitive issue for some. But I hope that, whether you are single, married, widowed, divorced or remarried, we could all agree that marriage carries with it an intention to be permanent. The wedding couples I meet all, without exception, express the desire that their union be lifelong. None of them say, 'We're going to give it 3 years and then see what happens.'

Of course, marriages don't always work—we live in a broken world, we are fallible, imperfect people and there are lots of pressures on marriage. But their intention at the outset is that they will stay joined together, come what may—for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better for worse etc.

Jesus is simply trying to draw the Pharisees back to that intention, that desire for permanence. The Old Testament Law only allowed divorce because of men's hard-heartedness – it protected the woman because the certificate of divorce freed her from the accusation of adultery when, out of necessity, she remarried. But the Pharisees had become so preoccupied by the circumstances in which divorce can take place that they have forgotten the original intention, that marriage be permanent.

### **So, is re-marriage after divorce possible?**

The Church has sought to hold this (delicate) balance between, on the one hand, safeguarding the understanding of marriage as a lifelong, permanent commitment and, on the other, recognising that divorce is possible and permissible, and that couples have the legal right to remarry.

In the past the Church of England has sought to hold this balance by refusing to have

the marriage of a person with a previous partner living solemnized in church, but instead offering a special service of prayer and dedication after a civil ceremony (which have become known as 'Wedding Blessings'). More recently, church law has allowed the marriages of divorcees in church at the discretion of the local church minister. This is why you will find that different churches have different policies with regard to marrying divorced people in church.

It's a difficult balance to strike. Personally speaking, I have no problem with remarriage after divorce, providing the circumstances make it sensible and prudent to do so. The judgement about that is entirely the couple's and, whilst I am happy to be a listening ear, the ultimate decision on whether to remarry really is none of my business.

However, whether that marriage takes place in church or not is not just the couple's decision. A marriage solemnized in church is a public act of worship, a sign to the community, a public commitment by the couple. So, as a minister with a representative role, not only must I seek to uphold the teaching of the church that marriage is a lifelong vocation, I also want to be able to say, with integrity, 'This is right. We bless this in God's name.' This is so much harder to do where there has been a previous marriage. For a start, you don't get to meet the ex-spouse or those who invested in the first marriage in some way. In circumstances where I have been unwilling to allow divorcees to marry in church, some people have told me that I am being 'pastorally insensitive', without ever considering that it might be pastorally insensitive (to the people I don't get to meet) to proceed with the wedding.

And, inevitably perhaps, some couples conclude that they are being 'judged' if they are denied a church wedding because one or both of them are divorcees, particularly in our individualised '*I can have what I want*' culture. '*I thought the church was meant to be forgiving*' and '*Doesn't God give second chances?*' is what some have said. Of course the church is to be forgiving. God is forgiving, outrageously so and gives second, third, fourth etc. chances. But is re-marriage in a church building the effective sacramental symbol of that forgiveness? If the couple want to find and feel forgiveness, let them confess what needs to be confessed, be absolved, take bread and wine and seek the reassurance they need that God has forgiven them in Christ. God longs for that. Marrying in a church building isn't necessarily the appropriate means of symbolising that forgiveness. So, in trying to sensitively hold this delicate balance, please pray for your vicar!

Revd Chris Martin, July 2017