

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

03.10.2021
By Ruth Harvey

Introduction

This is another of the uncomfortable texts in the Gospel. Law pitted against theology. Right versus wrong. You're either in, or you're out – little space for ambiguity, doubt, question or uncertainty.

In Jesus's response we may also find little comfort.

Yet he points us to a wider, deeper truth – that our longings and our practices must find a home in our deep calling to justice, not only in the cut and thrust of a cerebral test. That we inhabit the in-between spaces more than the polarities.

As we approach this text of binaries I invite you to reflect on the complexity of all of life. When making an everyday decision, where do you sit on the scale of clarity? Are you someone who always knows what you think? Or are you someone who needs time to reflect, ponder, explore? What kinds of decisions do you find easy to make? Which ones do you find more difficult?

Text

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.

Jesus is confronted with a pragmatic, theological and inter-personal conflict all at once in this passage: what does the law tell us about marriage, divorce and right relationships? Where law and theology come into conflict there can often be pain, even terror. Whether this is in a fundamentalist state or in a liberal democracy, always the scourge of judgement, of in-groups and out-groups, sits close just around the corner, like an enemy waiting to pounce.

On Iona recently, as part of our time living together as Members of the Iona Community, we have had some powerful conversations about what it means to live a non-binary life. This is a conversation led by our younger Members and Volunteers, shared with our guests and staff, and impacting all our lives. When we introduce ourselves it has become natural to say where we come from. Now increasingly we are saying: 'My name is Nic, I live in Glasgow, and my pronouns are she/her.' Or 'My name is Nic, I live in Glasgow, and my pronouns are they/them.' The freedom to self-declare the nuance of our inner self is clear. The question of particularity, of addressing God, is evolving. These are crucial questions of our time, being asked by a generation increasingly repelled by the binaries presented by most faith traditions, and instead, attracted to and drawing others to a world of nuance, diversity, inclusion, and new language.

Our service of prayers for justice and peace in Iona Abbey in early September was led by Alex and Jo Clare-Young. Their powerful reading of Genesis 1:1-24 took us from the binary of sun and rain through the spectrum of the rainbow; from the binary of dawn and dusk through the gentle complexity of day; from the binary of conflict and peace through the journey of reconciliation and mediation that we know so well.

Jesus' response is often nuanced in the face of precision. Less so it may seem in these verses where he finishes his reflection by cementing the teaching on marriage and divorce with exactitude: 'what God has joined together, let no one separate.' And yet Jesus says 'what God has joined....' rather than 'what law has joined...' or 'what humans have joined....' Even this apparently blunt sentence has unexplored nuances and potentials.

The segue then into Jesus' teaching about the spiritual wisdom of children seems all the more puzzling, yet at the same time liberating.

The first verses of today's reading begin with the 'wise' teachers, the Pharisees demanding unequivocal answers. The passage ends with Jesus placing not the most learned, or the oldest, or the conventionally most wise at the centre, but rather placing at the centre of our decision-making the wisdom of the newborn, the sagacity of the smallest, the urgency of the least assuming.

Prayer

By Alex Clare-Young

God of day and night, dusk and dawn,
sometimes we see only binaries.
Help us to notice the diversity of your people.

God of sea and sky, horizons and margins,
sometimes we yearn to stay safe in the centre.
Help us to go out to the edges of your community.

God of trees and flowers, bushes and shrubs,
sometimes we are determined to categorise.
Help us to move beyond easy words and assumptions.

God of sun and moon, stars and comets,
sometimes we are stuck on the next big problem or debate.
Help us to pay attention to the little niggles of daily injustice and struggle.

God of hawks and dolphins, of puffins and penguins,
sometimes we close our ears to new ideas.

Help us to come into dialogue with each other,
hearing stories,
meeting other realities,
ready and willing to change our minds.

Amen.

Further Reading

For inspiration, solidarity and deeply disruptive solace, visit the website of Alex Clare-Young: <https://alexclareyoung.co.uk/>

Read their story in 'Transgender. Christian. Human.' Published by Wild Goose Publications <https://www.ionabooks.com/product/transgender-christian-human/>