

October 3rd

Parts of today's gospel reading can be a hard to understand. It can seem very harsh in its' message for us in todays' society, but we should not shy away from looking at the real messages behind the words Jesus uses.

Historically in the world of Jesus, individuals really did **not** get married. **Families** did. One family offered a male, the other a female. Their wedding stood for the wedding of the larger extended families and symbolized the coming together of the families involved. It would be undertaken with a focus on political and financial gains. Marriage was not a matter of "falling in love." It was very much a matter of "honouring one's parent's wishes."

Divorce, then, would entail the breaking down of these extended family ties.

And it would present a particular challenge to the family of the wife, sadly it would often result in family feuds. There would also be an element of shame attached to such a situation.

All of this was based on what we read in Genesis. And it is that part which is included in our church wedding service. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." A sentiment I thoroughly approve of particularly as I approach my Golden wedding next year.

But, down the ages, this passage has been used to keep people in marriages that are so broken that harm is imposed upon the entire family system.

At a time when the spotlight is on violence to women and the current appalling levels of domestic violence, society is right challenge literal use of those words.

I have to say that sometimes, the most loving action someone can take may mean ending a very broken relationship.

But, what about God's view of all this?

The God we believe in, our God, does **not** desire anyone to live a broken life.

Jesus makes it clear that his desire is for us to live in a loving and caring relationship with our families and with the wider community.

We know that human love is often broken love. We are broken, fallen people. But, in Jesus, we begin to realise that there are **no** limits to the love of God.

I believe the most important thing we need to understand **is that God is different from us and God's love has no limits.**

Our human understanding of love is often different from the reality of God's love for us.

Jesus continually demonstrates that the love of God is not only limitless, but, that is disruptive, even revolutionary to the society we live in.

God's love is always going to challenge our way of thinking, our understanding of love and the way we live in relationship to others.

Jesus goes further in his explanation of unconditional love when he confronts the disciples, who want to shoo away the bothersome children who seem intent on pestering Jesus, encouraged by their mothers who want the best for their children. The disciples attitude reflects the society of the day which valued neither women nor children. **Jesus turns this attitude on it's head.**

Jesus was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

This is a message about valuing everyone, Not just children but he includes the weak, the poor, the fallen, everyone. No one, absolutely no one, is excluded from the unconditional love of God.

It is a model that we can only aspire to, BUT a model that Jesus gives us time after time. He summarises it in the well know form of "Love your neighbour as yourself." or as the Golden Rule of the Jews puts it "**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**"

Over the years I have lost count of the times a parent of a small child has apologised because their child has made a noise or cried in church. I always give the parent the same answer. "If there's no room for children in this church then none of us should be here." The last time I said this was only two of weeks ago and yes, in our church.

I know usually is from someone fairly new to church and who worries that churchgoers are a pious and judgemental bunch. I am glad to report that you don't meet that criteria!

But we do need continue to watch for and encourage our new families and those who we may find different to ourselves. Jesus was very clear about that.

So I will finish by repeating that God's message this week is about valuing everyone, the young the old the weak, the poor, the fallen and importantly ourselves. No one, absolutely no one is excluded from that unconditional love which God has for each one of us. Amen