

# All are welcome in this place!

A sermon preached by Rev Dr Michael Paterson at St Margaret's on 7 October 2018  
Our Gospel reading was Mark 10.2–16

I often wish when I am preparing my sermons that, here at Rosyth, we could have two goes at looking at the scripture readings together. Once in bible study to really do close-up work with the texts. and once in the Sunday eucharist to identify the good news, the invitation, or the challenge that the texts offer for our own lives.

I say that especially today because the story we have just heard – which at first reading looks like a clear prohibition on divorce – is not really the story at all, and certainly not the full story.

It's true of any biblical passage (but particularly pertinent this morning) that the only way to understand a biblical extract such as we have just heard is to do so sitting down on a three-legged stool in which

- one leg is the biblical text
- a second leg is the context in which the story happens
- and the third leg is made up of all the co-texts, the other things that are said or happen around the particular passage.

Because it's only when we bring all three legs of that stool together that the full meaning of the biblical passage emerges.

To put it another way, when we ignore one of the three legs, when we only read the text and ignore the context, when we cherry-pick a text as if it had no co-texts, then we can be sure that our reading will be unsteady, our interpretation wobbly and our take on the passage likely to come crashing down.

So, imagining we are sitting not on our padded church seats this morning but on the interpreter's three-legged stool, let's see what happens when we place this text about marriage in context.

And as soon as we do that, then the first thing we see is that this isn't a story about divorce so much as a story about Jesus being set up by his enemies.

The key to the context is in the opening words "the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus". The Pharisees weren't interested in people like you and I who go through the pain of relationship breakdown. They couldn't care two hoots for the untold misery that follows when dreams are shattered and love turns sour. They came to Jesus "to test" him; to lay a trap for him; to ensnare him.

He was becoming too popular with the crowd. He was challenging everything they stood for. The Pharisees were faithful, dutiful, loyal religious folks. They had kept the rules all their lives and had done the right thing. In their own minds they had earned a place in heaven. Or so they thought. But now they felt threatened by this new kid on the block, the latest in a series of wandering preachers who could woo the crowds with his dynamic preaching, perform miracle cures and even raise folk from the dead.

They had been out to get Jesus since that day in Chapter 7 when he told them that their keeping of the law was all lip service, and that their hearts were far from him. When he exposed their religious observance as empty and their teaching as vacuous.

The lines in the sand were drawn that day, and ever since they had been looking out for a chance to do away with him and have him crucified as an enemy of the state, an enemy of religion.

That's the real issue here. And so to test Jesus they drag up Moses "Moses allowed divorce" they say. "Are you a greater teacher than him?"

Jesus doesn't mince his words in reply. "Moses only permitted divorce, not because marriage should be taken lightly, but because some of your men were hard-hearted and were exploiting their vulnerable wives. That's why divorce was permitted. Not to undermine marriage, but to protect those who were being abused."

The Pharisees wanted case law, but Jesus takes them right back to basics.

"God's design was for mutuality in relationships, not exploitation" he says. "But when relationships turn sour, as they sometimes do, and exploitation replaces mutuality, God's law makes it possible for a relationship to end."

And so, sitting on our three-legged stool, reading this passage in context what we see is that Jesus's beef is not with Moses or the law, but with people whose hearts have become encrusted and closed and deadened by their own self-righteousness. Jesus's beef is against those who use their own religious views to exploit others to wield power over them the way abusive people wield power and exploit the vulnerability of their partners.

And, reading this text in the light of the co-texts from Mark's gospel, what we find is that in upholding the aspiration of "till death us do part" Jesus is not waving a wagging finger at couples who come to the end of the road, but raging against churchy folk who divorce religion from holiness, law-keeping from life, and who exploit others for their own ends rather than foster mutuality in relationships of any kind.

"Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh is God's purpose. Anything less is heresy" says Jesus.

And so today, my heart goes out to people in this congregation whose marriages have broken down and who (because of a one-legged stool approach to this text) have lived their lives in self-doubt and shame, feeling doubly wounded: first by the breakdown of their relationships and secondly by being left to feel that they had let God down too.

My heart goes out to gay men and women in our churches who have been told this passage only goes to prove that the only kind of love God that gets God's approval is the love between a man and a woman, and as a result have walked away from church or live in hiding within our congregations.

And my heart goes out to all those who have only known exploitation in relationship and never the true mutuality for which we were created and to which we are called.

And to each and every one of them I say that in St Margaret's, and in the Scottish Episcopal Church, there is no place for the wagging of judgment or words of condemnation, and that the only campaign which has God's seal of approval is the war against exploitation.

And to each and everyone who has been hurt by religious teaching I say that here mutuality and love will be fought for and that ultimately: All are welcome! All are welcome! All are welcome in this place! Let's stand sing our faith together. Not in the words of the creed, but in hymn number 409 "Let us build a house where love can dwell" during which the offertory collection will be taken and the table laid.

**Ed:** You can find Marty Haugen's hymn at <http://tinyurl.com/yam9ergp>, or listen to it and read the words on YouTube at <http://tinyurl.com/yapdxgz9>.