

Leave the Judgement to God, because we are here to love

What does this Gospel mean for us today? It means that the covenant of marriage is still just as valid today as it was in the beginning of creation. In an ideal world, when a man and a woman marry, they commit themselves to each other in such a way as to form an exclusive relationship of love and devotion and a new entity is born: The two become as one. In an ideal world there would be no such thing as divorce. The thing is though; we don't live in an ideal world. We live in a fallen world in which human nature always comes up short of the glory of God.

Do I believe in the Sacredness and sanctity of marriage? Absolutely I do. Do I believe that divorce goes against the will of Christ? Yes I do. I also believe that lying, deceit, and treating people unjustly goes against the will of God, and sorry but I have been guilty of all these. Should I then be judged and marginalised by my church and community? Also theft is a sin, but how does Jesus deal with the repentant thief crucified at his side, he says: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." The forgiveness and mercy of God is instant and unconditional. So as the Church of God I have to ask how we can feel it is ok to put conditions on the forgiveness and mercy that we show to those whose relationships break down or do not follow the teachings of Christ. Christ forgives unconditionally and yet his church insists on conditions and judgement to earn full forgiveness. Are we saying we know better than Christ? Because if we are, **How dare we?**

I love my job as a Mental Health Chaplain, but I am so tired of people, whose relationships have broken down, coming to see me and saying that they feel their church is the last place where they will receive compassion and support. They have been or feel they will be, judged and rejected. The sad truth is there are people in our mental health hospitals because of the church. **How dare we?**

One lady came to see me quite a while ago. She told me of the awful treatment she received at the hands of her husband. I will not go into details, but enough to say that by the end of her story we were both in tears. She was moved to a safe house and divorced her husband. After a few months she returned to her parish where she had been

very active in many areas. She needed the support of her community to help her recover. Instead she was ignored by many, and felt judged and marginalised. She went to see her parish priest who recommended that she try and rebuild her relationship with her husband, and then he was sure she would be welcomed back. She completely broke down and ended up in Highbury hospital. **How dare we?**

I genuinely wonder if we as a Church, just as the Pharisees did, have lost some of our trust and faith in the power, majesty and authority of our Saviour. It is almost like we are trying to do his job for him. It is no coincidence that today's scripture ends with Jesus telling the disciples to let the children come to him. Children, as they often are in the scriptures, are used as an example of those considered insignificant, those who are considered unworthy, and those who are marginalised. Today that would certainly include, those who have been divorced, or committed adultery, those who live together but are unmarried and those in same sex relationships. But listen to the words of Jesus, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs'. An even starker warning for us comes in his words in last week's Gospel when he says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea".

The message is clear, if someone believes in Christ, we must welcome them with acceptance and compassion and love, and if there is healing and conversion to be done, then we should trust Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, to deal with that. For me, to do any different does not show a lack of faith on the part of those coming to us, but rather a lack of faith on our part.

I know that many people will have issues with what I am saying, and quote Christian leaders and traditions to show me that Christians have lived this way for many years. Well NEWSFLASH people, we are not called to live like other Christians, we are called to live like Christ. Christ is love. Christ is mercy.

On his recent visit to Ireland Pope Francis apologised, on behalf of the Church, for the awful actions of some of its members. Now I am not the Pope, and I would never dream of speaking on behalf of the church or anyone but myself. But I feel I must say from my heart, that to anyone who through a breakdown of their relationship has felt judged, marginalised and/or rejected by the Church, I am truly sorry, and if there's anyone here today who's labouring under the burden of guilt and shame because you're divorced, leave that burden behind you, let God dispose of it, once and for all. And if you're still holding on to hurt and anger caused by a divorce, let go of that, as well. You've carried it long enough. **Please** do not let the words and actions of other people, prevent you from being touched by the unconditional love, compassion and mercy of Christ. In Christ, all is forgiven; all things are new. **Please** let that be Good News for you this day and forevermore.

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Recent news and events are probably the biggest reminder yet that we are a Holy Church, that is made up of sinful people. We are all sinners. We are a bruised church, a hurting and dirty Church. In his recent letter to the people of God, Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict from Good Friday 2005, when he said: "How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to Christ! How much pride, how much self-complacency! In the statement from the catholic bishops of England and Wales they say: "in communion with bishops throughout the world, we seek forgiveness from the Lord". As a Church we seek that forgiveness with the faith and knowledge, that once we turn to God with repentant hearts, we are forgiven and we will receive the unconditional love and mercy of God. So why do we, as a church, find it so difficult to reach out, to those whose lives and actions have fallen outside the law, the rules and the man made traditions of the church, with the same unconditional love and mercy?

I have spoken many times of how this parish of ours is special. It is so open and welcoming and loving. However we must remember that the general perception outside of our community is that the Catholic Church is a Dogmatic Church and a judgemental church. From my examples today, we can see that even many within our church; have

felt just how judgmental we can be.

Allowing for all this I have never felt more excited, passionate and blessed to be a member of the Catholic Church. A Church I love with all my heart. Today we as a Church have a wonderful opportunity to change that perception and reality for so many people. We have a choice: We can pay lip service to those whom we have mistreated and failed, and we can then return to hide behind our man made traditions and rules.

Or we can follow the example of Pope Francis, and continue to open up with, humility, remorse, vulnerability and true sorrow. We can then extend the love and mercy we will receive from God to all people, whether they share our values or not. We can open up and show this world that we really are the Church of God, a Church that is full of unconditional love and mercy. We as a Church need to decide if we are prepared to let go of our judgemental culture and embrace the culture of unconditional love. Because we cannot, be both a church of Judgement and a Church of love.

As St Theresa of Calcutta tells us, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them”.

To always put love first means that we will become more open and things will change. This can be scary, and by opening up through love means that some people will abuse that love and take advantage of it and therefore more hurt will come our way.

But as Saint Theresa of Calcutta also says: “I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love”.

As individuals and as a Church, I think it is time to

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