

Mark 10

Divorce

This passage is a very influential one. In it Jesus is delivering a piece of teaching which is very surprising to his listeners. We should turn up 1Cor 7:10, where we find this:

To the married I give this ruling, and it is not mine but the Lord's: a wife must not be separated from her husband, or if she has already left him she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband; and a husband must not divorce his wife.

Since this is the type of controversy that must constantly have flared up between early Christians and Jews, we are obliged to ask whether we have original tradition here from the time of Jesus, or Church teachings that have become enshrined in a story about Jesus. The state of Jewish practice at the time of Jesus is, I think, fairly well-known: divorce was variously allowed or disallowed, in various circumstances, according to the religious company one kept: the strict Qumran community, which moved away from ordinary life into the desert to preserve itself from corruption, declared that a man twice married was living as a whore. They thought that "God created them A male and A female", and also, curiously, that "the animals went in two by two, hurrah!" The Christian Church always enforced this strictness. However, divorce in general was governed by Deuteronomy (24:1-4):

Suppose a man has taken a wife and consummated the marriage, but she has not pleased him and he has found some impropriety of which to accuse her; he has therefore made out a writ of divorce for her and handed it to her and then dismissed her from his house; she leaves his house and goes away to become the wife of another man. Then suppose this second man who has married her takes a dislike to her and makes out a writ of divorce for her and hands it to her and dismisses her from his house - or if this other man who took her for his wife dies, her first husband, who has repudiated her, may not take her back as his wife now that she has been made unclean in this way. For that is detestable in God's eyes, and you may not bring guilt on the country which the Lord is giving you as your heritage

- a passage which was originally designed to protect the wife and give her a certain amount of freedom. This is the passage where "Moses permitted us" to divorce.

Note that the Pharisees twice mention "permission": is it permitted in our law...Moses permitted us. Jesus twice answers using the word "commandment": what did Moses *command* you...Moses gave you this *commandment*. So Jesus is seeking the will of God, where his interlocutors are seeking their own rights, looking for the widest possible latitude within what is allowable. We

may feel that this attitude would undermine any marriage before it began; but of course we are talking about a Christian marriage, formed by the very teaching that the Lord is about to deliver; we can draw our own historical conclusions about what happens to marriage when his teaching is once more relegated to the realm of the impossible. He says “In the beginning...” - a formula which can be roughly interpreted as “There has never been any other way!” It is implicit on the deed of creation that one man was created for one woman; it is written in our nature, and it is to be received gratefully, without sentimentality, and without contempt. “For this reason...”- the dramatic step of forsaking father and mother (and thus the protection of one’s own clan) was once far more demanding than it is today; but it is still the prerequisite for marriage. “The two become one; God’s creation of sexuality is written indelibly in these words, and there is no room for anything of the later view that sexuality was some kind of human weakness; it is God’s creation, and in it he reveals his own image in us.

“In the house” always implies that there is here a reflection on the teaching Jesus has just delivered, probably reflecting the evolution that took place in the early Church. It is set in the form of a dialogue with Jesus, not to claim for later doctrinal developments a dominical authority they don’t have, but because the Evangelist does not see such development as “beyond the will of Christ”. In the Acts of the Apostles the same intimate connection is made between the decisions of the apostles and their community and the will of God: “It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves”. We can see the later implications in the way the teaching is given: in Jewish law a woman was never allowed to initiate divorce, let alone remarry, of her own free will; but Graeco-Roman law allowed this, and it is to that world of the empire that this teaching is really addressed.

We can make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is simply identifying himself with the severest form of Judaism. But his insistence on the commandment of God rather than the question of what is permissible is a fundamental victory over legalism. God made us as he did out of loving concern for us. Ephesians founds the principle of monogamous marriage on the love of God as we have been shown it in Christ. Jesus reminds us of the Creator, and shows us his mind; it is on that basis that we are invited to live out our lives. We don’t do that by simply asking what is forbidden us. It even invades the area of what is permitted, *and changes it*. This is the way in which Jesus delivers us from the law, and calls us to a freedom that is much more demanding.

It is worth noting that Mark has placed this piece of teaching in the latter half of his Gospel, after the announcement of the Passion, and during the making-clear of the suffering that the redemption will entail. It is set amid the teachings about discipleship, and the response of the Twelve make it clear that they are finding it hard to swallow - and Matthew spells out this difficulty in his version of the incident (Mt 19).

Children

I do not think this is really a passage about children so much as a passage about what it means to be a disciple. There is no record of children ever having played any special rôle in the Church. The children are of indeterminate age: the same word means a baby in John 16, a twelve-year-old (Jairus’ daughter) in Mk 5, and a nursing infant in the Gospel of Thomas.

Jesus' anger when they are turned away is the same as his anger with illness (1:41) and unbelief (3:5). He defends them (as opposed to their parents) from the onslaught of the disciples, who seem only interested in those who have a fully adult capacity to believe. He defends them, not because they are pure or sinless, or a model for the ascetic (as the Gospel of Thomas makes them), but simply because they are passive, unable to defend themselves, and worthy of blessing *simply because they have nothing to show for themselves*. Their hands are empty, like those of a beggar. This is the only way to come to inherit the Kingdom. In the next verse Jesus enlarges his promise to include everyone. Notice the free authority he displays over the entrance to the Kingdom. The children are to receive it and welcome it, but not to build it or storm it or force it to come or fight for it. The outward actions of Jesus here confirm his sincerity.

Freedom from possessions

The story purposely doesn't describe the man; he can be any one of us. The question he asks is the one all religious enquirers ask, very fundamental. But this man wants something more than the stock answers. Jesus reels off commandments at random, from memory; there is no legalistic order here. Of course, if he is going to *inherit* eternal life, there is no merit involved; one inherits by the grace and favour of the benefactor.

V 18 presents problems for the theologians, and we may discover something important about them because of it. Jesus' sinlessness seems to be in peril here, as he disowns the title "good"; it might even be thought that he is disclaiming his divinity. But we should not apply the Trinitarian doctrines of the theologians in such a way as to obstruct the word of God. A concept like the sinlessness of Christ does not come across in the Gospel as a tenet, an article of faith about every moment of his life. It is in temptation that he reveals his sinlessness, just as it is in his attitudes and actions that his divinity is expressed. One of the features of Jesus is his avoidance of drawing attention or influence to *himself*; it is to the God who is above that he has come to bear witness. This truth is not adequately expressed in the classical formulae of the Trinity, with their insistence on an almost mathematical equality between the persons. As you are probably tired of hearing me say, the teaching on the Trinity is primarily about an *event* - the event of Jesus. It is distilled from the effort to say what was happening in that life, and grand unchanging formulae have to give way to the live experience people had of Jesus, who sought nothing for himself, except that he might bear witness to his Father.

When he claims to have kept the commandments, the man is not lying or proud. Jesus looked on him and loved him. He has lived in daily obedience, with God. Jesus' gaze here is similar to that in the call of the disciples (1:18-20, 2:14) where *he sees them* and then chooses them - even when they have not been in the circle of those who heard his preaching, like the tax-collector. We feel strongly that Jesus' call to him is very personal. We know that not all people were called to travel with Jesus (the Gerasene demoniac, 5:19). What he asks of him is that he should give witness to his keeping of the commandments - already accomplished - by becoming a follower of Jesus, by recognising *in him* the God he has always served. His following is to be exclusive - demonstrated by the sacrifice of all other goods. Once again Jesus is doing a divine deed - asking everything. The gloom which spreads over his face as he leaves does not betoken

rebellion, but a certain sense of dismay that his inability to receive the kingdom then and there has been exposed to him; *there is something which is more important to him.*

V 23 (“Jesus looked round at his disciples”) turns from the individual who has left to the whole Church, and what follows is therefore meant for all of us. The alarm of the disciples belongs to all who are confronted by God, or the demands of God. Jesus senses this response, and uses the word “children” to them - the only time he does so outside the Gospel of John. The suggestion that the grotesque camel/needle statement refers to a gate into Jerusalem called the Needle’s Eye emanates from a ninth-century commentary and is to be disregarded. We are all to be progressively detached from our possessions in favour of the kingdom; and this is to be accomplished, like all the other gifts, not by our efforts, but by the prior grace of God.