



*Sermon: 6 October 2024*

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## **Empathy and Love Triumphs over Legalism**

Over the years I have found that no matter what I say about today's reading from Mark it seems to bother divorced people. However, the key issue that Jesus speaks about is our human weakness and he says God recognises that weakness. Jesus is however critical of the law that allows only men to divorce their wives and introduces the unique (for Jews at that time) possibility that women can also divorce their husbands.

The God we image in Jesus Christ is a God who recognises human weakness and assures us of new beginnings. Christ offers, and continues to offer, freedom from whatever slavery, life or other people impose upon us. Slavery is very bad indeed and no marriage should ever be able to be described as slavery.

A recent episode of TVNZ's programme 'My Family Mystery' briefly explored the life of a former slave who escaped to the merchant navy and settled in Aotearoa. The brief vision the viewer was given of slaves working on a sugar plantation was truly horrific. They worked from dawn to dusk. Women worked with babies strapped to their bodies, and life was brief and unvalued, but colonial economy thrived.

I was reminded of recently hearing a politician comment that, during the Covid pandemic, we put too much value on human life and our economy would be in better shape if we allowed more people to die. Interesting that fatalistic approach to disease and accident, and the worship of an economic order, has been firmly rebutted by the recent Paralympic Games.

We not only saw people overcoming extraordinary odds, to not only triumph, but also display amazing empathy and humanity to their competitors.

Our reading from Job begins where the heavenly court agrees to test Job's integrity. In our Gospel reading the Pharisees come to test Jesus by posing a legal question in the belief that his compassion will drive Jesus to ignore the law and so discredit himself.

We get much more from these small biblical books like Job if we understand that they are well constructed stories, and we read the whole book. That way we get to empathise with Job's suffering and the lack of empathy he receives from his wife and his friends.

Job's friends offer "pastoral care" by insisting that his suffering is caused by sin so he should confess and seek God's forgiveness. Even if he was not aware of the sin he must have sinned otherwise he would not be suffering.

It is the same cause and effect language that people in our world use to blame the poor for being poor.

Sometime in the past our government changed the name of the unemployment benefit to the job seekers benefit. That was because they believed people were unemployed because they weren't trying to get a job. It is easy to blame the poor for being poor but in our postmodern, post New Zealand Post economy some people are unemployable because of lack of skills or disability both physical and mental. They are also unemployed because they lost their jobs. We are downsizing our public service at the moment. Our niece was made redundant the last time that happened and, with two children, had to retrain as a schoolteacher because nobody wanted a woman with a master's degree in public health.

I mentored a woman who refocused her life by obtaining a law degree but it took more than a year to get a job. In the meantime, her case worker suggested she retrain for something else.

Job's wife seems to have the opinion that sickness has no place in the domestic economy because she suggests that Job should forget his integrity, curse God and die.

Job however holds on to his integrity, is convinced he is blameless and holds to the theological position that, in accepting what is good from God, he must also accept what is bad.

In our Christian understanding we are less inclined to blame God and find it more acceptable to say that, as we accept the good things in life, we also need to be prepared to accept that things will go wrong. History shows that pandemics happen and the way communities face those challenges is a measure of their humanity.

Nevertheless, we struggle with the concept of a loving God who allows bad things to happen. In fact, there are no easy answers to the question of why bad things happen to good people. It is even worse than that because the pandemic proved that bad governance meant that good people died, and compassionate governance got blamed for business failure and individual inconvenience.

Somewhere in the wars that rage at the moment there are likely bad human motives causing bad things to happen to good people and innocent children. But all our attempts to understand God are limited by our humanness.

Furthermore, there is a thin line between praying for healing and claiming that people whose health doesn't improve haven't prayed enough or did not have enough faith.

A long time ago when I was doing a Clinical Pastoral Education Course, one of my placements was at Hillmorton Hospital. I talked with a person who was back in hospital because someone told him that if he had enough faith to stop taking his medicine Jesus would heal him.

To my way of thinking that was bad pastoral care. It was as misguided as the friends of Job who insisted that he confess the sins he didn't know he committed. So, I suggested that Christ was present in the clinical staff who prescribed the medication, and the Spirit of healing inspired the scientist that developed the medicine. That works for pandemics too.

God is not a divinity that functions through human laws or a limited view of cause and effect. That was the problem with the Pharisees who confronted Jesus seeking support for flawed divorce laws. The pastoral care that hospital chaplaincy provides is very much part of the healing process, but it is also about being part of the team that includes the clinical staff.

When we pray for healing, we are not only sharing our hope with God, but we are empathising with people's suffering. We are also reminding ourselves to be loving, caring and empathic. We are also opening ourselves to the Spirit's inspiration as we seek ways we can also be part of the healing we hope for.

Most importantly, pastoral care and prayer can open a patient's desire to be healed. Job's wife implored him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:10) and often the suffering from illness is enough to make people wish they were dead. However, time and time again miraculous cures happen because people have a heightened will to live. As a boy, one of the books I read, listened to on the radio, and saw the film was *Reach For The Sky*, the story of Douglas Bader written by Paul Brickhill.

Those of us born around 80 years ago were not shielded from the horrors of war even in pacifist families like mine. Furthermore, apart from growing up while her father was fighting in France, my mother had a crush on Kenneth More who played Bader in the movie. Therefore, getting her to take me to see the film was easy.

There was one scene where Bader was lying in hospital critically injured through his own stupidity and he heard a nurse in the corridor chastise her noisy companion by saying "Shush there's a boy dying in there!"

"Oh no he's not" thought Bader and went on, even without legs, to fly fighter planes and resist captivity until the Germans finally sent him to Colditz.

Our natural healing process can be driven by our mental state and, apart from a youthful defiance and yearning for life, knowing that we are loved by others, and by God, can greatly improve our will to live.

That is the pastoral care that we can all be part of, as part of a team of healers. There is also a pastoral role in being beside people when death is inevitable.

Life inevitably has a conclusion that at some point has to be accepted and humanity cannot regulate or understand life's inconsistencies. Life simply needs to be lived with love and with empathy for the lives of others.

That is a concept the Pharisees failed to grasp with their limited vision of marriage and the male prerogative to divorce. Jesus pointed out to them that laws given by people to deal with human frailty are not necessarily the way God intends things to be.

In coming to grips with this text from Mark's Gospel we need to understand that, in the Jewish law of the day, adultery was committed against a husband. It was a crime one man committed against another for which the woman was punished.

Jesus makes the point that the man who constrains his wife by such a law but discards her for some trivial reason, or has a bit on the side, is equally guilty of adultery. We must also remember that in John's Gospel Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 11). Loving forgiveness brings new beginnings for both men and women.

The male centred understanding of adultery is still the case in many cultures today and women lose their lives because of it. It is also an understanding still imagined by males with an inclination to violence in our own society.

We hear a lot about ram-raids and boy racers, but I suspect that violence by men against women they profess to love is still high in the crime statistics.

Jesus dealt with that reality by expanding the human given right to divorce to open the possibility for women to divorce their husbands. Neither is an ideal situation, but humanity is not divine.

For people to move closer to divinity we must understand that, central to God's love, is forgiveness and new beginnings. It is not God's will for men or women to have their chance for new beginnings taken away by poisoned relationships. The God we image in Jesus Christ does not expect men or women to be restricted to violent or abusive relationships by fear for their lives.

Above all, what is most important to remember about this passage is that it shows a debate with antagonists. We must understand this text in the context of the whole Gospel in which Jesus presented a God of freedom, grace and new beginning.

To live in the realm of such a God does not require legalism. There is no virtue in scoring points by twisting laws designed to find a way to live in community despite human weakness.

To embrace the divine realm requires the loving acceptance a little child has towards those closest to them. The God we image in Jesus Christ recognises human weakness and assures us of new beginnings.

We are called to live that Christ Image to others.