

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit

Worship at Home: Sunday 3rd October

Preparation and Gathering prayer

As we continue to worship in different places, we remember those worshipping in church, and those who will use recorded services during the week.

Take a moment to consider all the things you have brought with you to this time - they're things that worry you, things to celebrate, things that lift you up, or things that bring you down. Hold out your hands as a symbol of offering these things to God.

Take from me, Gracious God,
the burdens I do not need to bear,
so that, in this moment,
I may focus on you alone.
In Jesus' name we ask it. **Amen.**

Listen, sing, read or pray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFpN5pJsFd0>

God is Love: let heaven adore him;
God is Love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him,
and exalt him with one voice.

God who laid the earth's foundation,
God who spread the heavens above,
God who breathes through all creation,
God is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love: and love enfolds us
all the world in one embrace,
with unfailing grasp God holds us
every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that self-same aching
deep within the heart of God.

God is Love: and though with blindness
sin afflicts each human soul,
God's eternal loving-kindness
holds and guides and keeps them whole.
Sin and death and hell shall never

o'er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever
o'er the universe must reign.

Timothy Rees (1874-1939) (alt.) Reproduced from Singing the Faith
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Prayers

God the Father, we adore you.
Male and female, each one made in your image,
yet every single one unique.

God the Son, we adore you.
You are with us every step of the way,
you are our going out and our coming in.

God the Spirit, we adore you.
You are in us and around us,
we are never alone with you in our lives.

God, Father, Son and Spirit,
we sometimes find it hard to come to you,
and confess our sins.

Sometimes our relationships – with you
and with each other – aren't right.
Sometimes it's too easy to let other people,
or things, keep us away from you.
And sometimes we try and keep others away.
Forgive us and teach us what matters to you.

When we come to you wanting to change,
you hear us and welcome us with open arms.
Help us, we pray, to let go of all
that gets in the way of our relationships with you,
with ourselves and with those around us.
And renew our lives, so that together,
we might live as you created us to live. Amen.

Old Testament Reading: Genesis 2.18-24

Gospel reading: Mark 10.2-16

Reflection

I find today's Gospel reading hard because my first marriage ended in divorce. Soon after our breakup, a minister chose this reading to tell me what he thought Jesus would want to say to me. I wasn't at the service so he sent me the tape of his sermon. I'd grown up hearing that divorce was

shameful so my conscience was already giving me a hard time, he didn't need to preach to me. But I wish I'd had the sense and the courage to ask someone to explore this passage with me - rather than deciding it condemned me. Because I needed to know that when it's used to justify marriage at all costs, it prevents the compassion and challenge it offers being received by those who need it and gets in the way of God's kingdom.

The Pharisees have an agenda when they meet Jesus. This isn't the first time they've 'tested' him and it won't be the last. Their question is designed to get Jesus into trouble. Divorce was accepted at the time. The issue was the grounds on which it was permissible. There were two positions, one was stringent, the other permissive. The Pharisees wanted to get Jesus to commit himself to one or other extreme. It didn't matter which. Either would be controversial – not just in the religious community – but in the political one too because Jesus is now in the territory where John the Baptist was beheaded after he'd challenged Herod's divorce and re-marriage. Commenting on it put him in danger from the political rulers. If he was endangering the peace the religious leaders had negotiated with their Roman occupiers, it gave them even greater reason to have him arrested and put an end to the chaos he was causing. Jesus knows the Pharisees know the answer to their question so he doesn't debate with them. Instead, he shows that focusing on when divorce is acceptable and when it's not misses the point. The heart of the matter isn't human tradition or law, it's God's desires for human life as part of God's good creation.

Jesus invites them to consider the creation stories in Genesis and says two things. The first (Mark 10.6b) is from the first creation story and the second (Mark 10.7-9) is from the second. The first is the context for the second. When God sees that everything God has created is good, God says, *“Let us make humankind in our image,*

according to our likeness...” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ (Genesis 1.26-27) This suggests that a human being on its own is not yet in God's image. For just as the fullness of God is seen in the relationship within God-self between the Father (or Parent), Son and Spirit, human beings are most fully human when we are in relationships with others, as distinct, yet united people. This doesn't only apply to marriage. It's what makes it possible for us all to live life in its fullness. So Jesus reminds the Pharisees that marriage is a God-given gift and that God's desire is that no one should separate them.

Anyone who has been through a divorce knows that the end of a relationship is extremely painful. Any marriage, however short, has a profound effect on those who want to keep their vows. The longer the marriage - especially if children are born - the deeper the impact on both partners. I know popular opinion says people take marriage too lightly today but that's not my experience. When marriages break up, it's usually a matter of deep regret and considerable pain to both partners. Whatever it might look to those looking in, I think a significant cause of breakdowns is the inability of the couple to create a relationship in which they'd become fully 'one flesh'. Becoming one flesh is a union of mind, spirit and body – that's much more than a physical relationship. Because our minds, spirits and bodies are shaped by relationships within our family, community and church from before we are born, all the positive and negative shaping we've experienced is brought into our new relationship. We are all, of course, made in the image of God. But over time that image has become distorted. It's exacerbated by the individualistic spirit of the age we live in. So, unless a couple has sufficient maturity to negotiate the habits and ideas embedded deep within each of them, or know how to ask for help, becoming one flesh can't be taken for granted. Sometimes, however strong the desire to stay,

the scars caused by their previous shaping, and the attempts to overcome them, may simply be too painful to sustain. A failed marriage is a tragedy for everyone involved in it. By the time divorce is thought of most are too broken to mend. Then, the Church especially, needs to respond with compassion and to participate in enabling all involved to experience healing.

It surprises us to realise, though, that healing demands we take Jesus' comment - that divorce is allowed '*because of your hardness of heart...*' - seriously. I don't write that lightly, because it can be used by outsiders, as well as couples, to blame and condemn one or the other or both. Yet even when it looks as if one person 'caused' the break-up - with the exception of situations where physical and psychological abuse is involved - it's unlikely to be caused by one person because hardness of heart is deeply embedded in us all. Even though it is not our fault that we have been shaped as we are, when our shaping contributes to the break-down of relationships healing will only come when we face up to it and the possibility of change. That's true, not just of marriage, but for all our relationships in families, communities, churches, neighbourhoods and with people throughout the world. When we see marriage within the larger number of relationships God gives us to enjoy, we can see it more realistically as part of the failure of all human relationships. So, as well as reminding the Pharisees that to be human is to live in relationship, Jesus also says Moses allowed divorce because humans are broken people. The brokenness that affects all our relationships is seen in our hardness of heart which results from the accumulation of habits, ideas, practices that have become embedded in us before and after birth and are reinforced in us by broken relationships with God's people and the world.

The Church has a great responsibility for the marriages it celebrates. We need to offer couples opportunities to explore the things that get in the way of becoming 'one-flesh': things we each think

are non-negotiable, that we can't let go of, but that prevent us from being as open as we want to be. This doesn't only apply to married couples. If we were all willing to share in such exploration, then the world could look very different, as our relationships with the poorest and most vulnerable change. That's what Jesus is saying when he invites the disciples to receive the kingdom of God as a little child. He says, come with no bargaining chips, with no grand ideas, just as you are, and take the risk of being in my company. It won't always be comfortable (he is, after all, on the road to Jerusalem), but it will be life-changing. If you're feeling rejected, you'll be welcomed. If your brokenness is overwhelming, you'll be given a blessing that sustains both the happily married, and the painfully separated. If you're willing to be opened to others, you'll experience the kingdom of God in the love, justice and peace you share in creating - with God. Amen.

Listen, sing, read or pray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnBjppHddkl>

One human family God has made,
and all for each to care.

One world, to be the home of all,
with all its wealth to share.

One Christ, to manifest on earth
love's ultimate design.

One Church to know the mystery
of broken bread and wine.

One race, one world -- yet torn apart,
we spurn the way of love.

But still ahead, the Christ leads on
and calls his Church to move
from love of power to power of love,
to give the word to all -
to trust the love that conquered death,
outside the city wall.

And are we brave enough to join
with that great company -
the cost not less than all we have
and are or hope to be --

the bitter cup of human sin
to drink with him who died,
and take his love outside the wall
to all the crucified?

Claim him who claims us for his own,
to share his pain and grief,
to bear the scars that stamp us his -
the hallmark of belief.
As partners of the living Christ,
who risk the path he trod,
with wondering love we find we share
the timeless joy of God.

Rosemary Wakelin (b. 1932) Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic
Words Edition, number 687 Words: (c) Rosemary Wakelin

Prayers for God's people and world

Gracious God,
we bring before you
the fragments of our relationships:
the splinters shaved off in arguments,
the chips that have broken off and left us scarred,
the parts of us that are shattered completely.

We pray for the churches, nations, communities,
families, individuals whose relationships are
broken including our own...

We pray for your healing for each of us,
for none of us is perfect,
and all are cracked to some degree.
Help us not to judge our brothers and sisters,
but to meet in the interdependence of your love.

We pray for those who are experiencing poverty,
violence or displacement and for those who are ill
or grieving...

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Dedication

Offer your regular giving to God.

With these gifts, gracious God,
I offer my life and the life of the Church,
and ask that you reshape me into the person
you created us to be. Amen.

Listen, sing, read or pray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfRN5dDkym8>

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go.

*As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands
and space to grow.*

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength
when all my words are weakness;
give me your love in spite of all you know.

Let love be real, with no manipulation,
no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope
through dreams and disappointments;
give me your trust when all my failings show.

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Closing Prayer and Blessing

Loving Lord, as we end this time of worship,
knowing that we are valued and loved,
help us to know this so deep in our being
that we live it in our words and actions,
and especially in our openness
and welcome to others.

May Jesus' invitation shine through our lives,
So that you and all God's people
might know the blessing of God,
the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and always. Amen.

Service prepared by Rev Sue Keegan von Allmen.

Prayers adapted from
<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/115-september-october-2021-b/proper-22/prayers> and others