

# Disrupting divorce: defending the discardable

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 6 October 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 20B

***The Challenge and Opportunity in Relationships adapted from Essential Teachings of Jesus by Richard Rohr; Mark 10: 2-16***

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

JOSEPHINE

‘anyone who divorces and marries another commits adultery’ – what are we to do with these words that sound so condemning? Is there any good news here for those who have divorced or are contemplating divorce? Should those, Penny, like you and me, who’ve been married nearly forty years, just be thanking our lucky stars? How do we read this troublesome text?

PENNY

*It is definitely more complex than those who weaponise this text to condemn others would like us to believe. Looking back on the years we’ve been together, I can think of many things that it was much better to go through together than on our own - raising children, serious sickness, the death of parents and other loved ones, emigration, moving houses and jobs multiple times, and just the stresses and strains of everyday life - to say nothing of gender affirmation. However, we’ve shared those things together on a core basis of mutuality and respect that simply did not exist in the world of Jesus. What do you see as some of the gaps between Jesus’s context and our own?*

JOSEPHINE

Well, firstly, Jesus’s world was patriarchal - men were in charge. A woman couldn’t divorce her husband. Men were the only people seeking divorces. It is also true that divorce was not against the Mosaic law. Deuteronomy thus allows a man to divorce a woman if she ‘displeased’ him. Displeasure could arise from major matters such as adultery right down to burning the dinner. The Pharisees argued about these things, with the Hillel school contending that any cause of displeasure was sufficient for divorce, and the Shammai school maintaining that divorce was only permitted for indecency, specifically adultery by the woman.

PENNY

*So, actually, Jesus was trying to liberalise the teaching around divorce and giving women a much more equal say? That sounds more like the Jesus we encounter elsewhere, who sides with the most vulnerable. Jesus was disrupting the standard divorce practice that allowed men to throw women out on the street, depriving them of any means of remarrying or economic support. Jesus would really have been swimming against the tide though – and possibly dangerously. Didn't John the Baptist get in trouble for condemning a divorce?*

JOSEPHINE

Yes, indeed! This is part of the context we really need to read this passage correctly. John didn't just get in trouble. He was executed after declaring 'unlawful' Herod Antipas' divorce and subsequent remarriage to Herodias. At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was in Perea, territory under the control of Herod Antipas. The question - 'is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife and marry another?' – therefore exactly echoes the grounds John gave for condemning Herod. Had Jesus agreed, they would also have been declared guilty of treason.

As in so many other places in Mark's narrative, the religious authorities in this story are seeking to test Jesus and catch him out in his teaching. One way to read the story would therefore be to see it as Jesus cleverly wriggling out of a dangerous trap and turning the tables on the questioners. Jesus does not declare divorce unlawful. However, those who sanction divorce in that context are shown to be 'hard-hearted' – like Pharaoh in refusing liberation to the enslaved.

*Clearly that would not have made Jesus popular with the religious authorities! Yet, for centuries and even today, particularly for women, hasn't the result of this teaching been to trap many people in loveless marriages, where there has been violence and abuse? And hasn't enforcing this text in this way also been the act of men, and particularly powerful religious men? I don't think women were able to seek divorce themselves for a long, long, time – or am I wrong?*

JOSEPHINE

No, you're right. A famous case of a Christian woman seeking a divorce is that of Ann Askew, much later in the time of Shakespeare. She was a devout Protestant who sought divorce on the grounds that she was yoked to an unbeliever, quoting I Corinthians chapter 7 verse 15. Unfortunately, she didn't get too far and was burnt at the stake! Sometimes it seems as if the teaching of church institutions around marriage is less to do with God and far more with upholding patriarchal, and often deeply political, structures of power and authority.

For example, as you and I know too well, only recently the Church of England bishops were asked whether they thought a couple should divorce where one member came out as transgender. They went away in a huddle and concluded that the couple should stay together – which is good! - but not for obvious reasons, such as that two people who love each other should continue to do so; and that transgender people deserve respect and protection.

Rather the bishops said that to do otherwise would go against their doctrine against divorce! How strange, especially given the Church of England's associations with the divorce of Henry VIII!

PENNY

*Given the political constraints mentioned earlier, Jesus in this teaching was therefore seeking to protect the vulnerable. That is the message we need to bring into focus. Women were disposable. Jesus was defending them and giving them value. Similarly, when Matthew tells this story, Jesus goes on to talk about eunuchs – again a highly vulnerable and disposable group, just as transgender people are today.*

*In both Mark and Matthew's accounts, Jesus also goes on to talk about young children. For, in the time of Jesus, young children were worth very little – and often not even given a name – until they were old enough to do some work. They were discardable. Throughout this whole chapter, Jesus is thus siding with the most vulnerable, and teaching us to do the same.*

JOSEPHINE

Yes, that's the take-away here. Jesus is encouraging us to notice the most vulnerable in our society, to see where they are at risk, and put them at the centre of our decisions and policy making. That still relates to divorce today. In our culture 44% of people divorce, and that's without counting the separations among the 28% or so of couples who never marry in the first place.

No one thinks that's great, and it's definitely the case that women and children tend to suffer the most in those circumstances. Yet what Jesus was hoping for was equity and liberation, not couples imprisoned in situations of adultery, addiction or abuse – or just where love has died and cannot be revived, as Orthodox Christianity recognises sometimes happens.

PENNY

*Indeed so, for Jesus is always about life triumphing over death. Too often we look at the status rather than the content of people's relationships. Too much Christian discussion about marriage and divorce then focuses on external legalities rather than on enabling value and growth. Core to the message of Jesus is refusing to allow our hearts to be hardened. For when hearts are hardened towards any individual or group, we fail one another. In all the complexities of relationships, if we can keep our gaze soft and lean our hearts into compassion we will find ourselves not far from what Jesus called the kingdom.*

*May we therefore also have hearts of flesh and not of stone, in the name of Christ. Amen.*