

SERMON: 2018/10/14 (21st Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Job* 23:1-9, 16-17; *Psalms* 22:1-15; *Hebrews* 4:12-16 & *Mark* 10:2-16_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

Now, you've probably guessed this already about me, but, let me tell you, I do like a bit of candy. Haribo, mostly.

But, sometimes, a bit of chocolate too.

[Take out from its hiding place a bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk.]

This is one of my favourites.

English chocolate.

It's much better than that Hershey's stuff you Americans eat.

It's creamy and smooth and...oh, *heavenly*.

But the thing is, the packet is really hard to open!

Here there are some (written) instructions, like the word of God, saying, 'Lift and pull here [to open]!'

And I've tried!

I "lift" and I "pull" and I pull, but the delicious sweet yumminess is very hard to get at.

Do you want to try?

[Let a volunteer have a go.]

Do you see?

It is very difficult!

Now, we've a couple of options before us:

One, we could give up, complaining bitterly. [ref. 23:2]

(But then we miss out on getting the reward we really want.)

Or, together, we could keep working at it until we succeed.

And this might mean asking for help: saying to God - or a friend of His(!), "give heed to me." (Which means, "listen, I need you.") - as Job did.

Let's pray: Father God, ???, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Jesus said: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Not long after we were married - certainly before Poppy was born - or perhaps shortly after? - Rebekah and I were attending the Sunday morning service at our local parish church, and the preacher, an elderly woman, separated and estranged from her (former) husband for *many* years and now living a single, solitary life in a small, dark house with a scruffy, smelly little dog and some creepy old cats, got up to deliver the sermon on this very text.

And I do mean, "up" to speak:

The pulpit sat atop some red marble pillars, almost five feet tall.

And you climbed to the top by a narrow set of steeply ascending stairs on one side.

She was a very kind and sweet person, nearly *always* smiling.

And a nervous one too: she had a habit of adjusting her glasses for no reason.

And she did both these things as she cleared her throat, before opening her mouth to say - and I quote: "Now, Jesus probably didn't mean what He said."

[Note: what follows here is merely a paraphrase] He observed that the Pharisees were likely trying to ensnare Him in some way - probably by catching Him in open, obvious contradiction to the commandments of Moses, which was their "orthodoxy" - and so, she suggested, He said merely what they wanted to hear: a conservative, stringent pronouncement forbidding divorce.

But surely He couldn't have been sincere.

No!

That would be insensitive, judgmental.

His seemingly prohibitive, "legalistic" reply was, therefore, merely a ruse, a ploy - one to placate those irritating, pious "nitwits," who had been plaguing him with pedantic criticism like blood-hungry mosquitos for many days now.

But my jaw dropped open.

I mean, literally: my mouth instinctively gaped open with shock.

"Jesus hadn't meant what He said."(!)

Jesus was what, then?

A liar?

"Two-faced"?

Now, no doubt she had been absolutely right that Jesus was facing a 'trap':^[n.1] After all, remember that Jesus has, at this juncture, journeyed to 'the region of Judea...beyond the Jordan.'^[10:1] - This was the *tiny* possession of the petty

tyrant, Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great; often called, "The Tetrarch." Jesus had *just* arrived in this postage-stamp sized desert-kingdom when the ambush was sprung.

In other words, He was still within sight of the border that He had crossed, the border separating *this* mini-state from that belonging to one of Philip's brothers, Antipas, a callous, lecherous man who had, *unabashedly*, abandoned his lawfully wed wife, Phasaelis, the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea [in what is now Saudi Arabia], in favour of his niece, Herodias, who had formerly been married to another brother, Herod II.

(Are you keeping up?

This is some sordid, "juicy" Game of Thrones shenanigans going on right here.)

Antipas - sometimes also known as Antipater in the literature - was a ruthless ruler who tolerated *minimal* criticism: no doubt you'll remember how he had already executed John the Baptist; which is why the Pharisees spring the question about divorce on Jesus *outside* of his domain - for their (own) instinct for self-preservation overrode their desire to see Christ eliminated, so they held back on raising this contentious issue until they were out-of-range of the king's mercenaries.

On the other hand, they've cornered the Savior near enough to the region where Antipas ruled so that, should they catch Jesus saying something disparaging about the monarch, if only even implicitly, it wouldn't be too far to, as a mob, hustle, bustle and shove Him back to a jurisdiction where He would be captured and killed for such remarks.

This, as far as I can deduce, is their strategy; their plan.

And given that they weren't asking a sincere moral-theological question - having already decided against Him, we might excuse Jesus for responding in kind - for not saying what He really thought...*except* for two, *good* reasons:

One, notice that Jesus is most explicit in speaking against divorce in the private, *safe* space of a disciple's home *after* the Pharisees have been sent "packing."

Two, *Jesus would never do such a thing!* It would cause too much confusion - havoc, even - if we had to second-guess Him, and any kind of deception would directly contradict His purposes, which, as He explains in *John* 10:10, is as follows: "'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'"

And the route there - eternal life in The Kingdom - isn't by half-truths and dissembling; by compromises and partial measures.

The salvation-journey is a '*hard*' one:[v.23] we were told that last week (because I had the readings reversed.)

And Jesus (immediately) repeated the word (in that short passage) so that we

wouldn't miss it: [v.24].

And if Jesus counsels us against divorce, and desires that every marriage would be life-long, this is because at the heart of holiness - at the heart of the Bible - is a *single, revolutionary* idea - commitment, the making and keeping of promises, one's "word," most often called by a synonym (in the Old Testament), "covenant." The word appears something like *four* hundred times, (almost).

And where would humanity be without it?

Noah would've drowned, and taken the zoo-safari business with him.

Abraham would never have left Ur, and would have continued, in vain, worshipping the moon: A lifeless lump of rock. Or is it cheese?

And his descendants the Hebrews would have all died in slavery, *pathetic*, exhausted, in Egypt.

And the Church?

That is to say, you and me?

I hate to think.

The *dreadful* bondage of unrestrained sin, of course.

But what is honourable and right in the world depends on people like us *binding* ourselves to each other, to institutions, communities, traditions and denominations, and persevering through thick and thin, on grey days and when the sun is shining; in sickness and in health.

Because this is what God has modeled for us since the very beginning - and before.

He endured - and endures (still) - all kinds of undesirable behaviors in us, and yet remains like the Prodigal Son's father, *waiting*, scanning the horizon, looking - not for fault, which is everywhere obvious - but for hope and potential, and we must be like that too:

Setting high standards for ourselves - those of the Scriptures, which we will certainly fall short of - and God knows we will, but never tiring of aspiring to do better, *for better*.

To wish that matters were otherwise - that holiness was easier, less exacting - is the wide road 'that leads to destruction'. [Mt. 7:13]

And this is *objectively* true in spite of whatever choices we feel have been *individually* necessary in our personal histories.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Kernaghan, Ronald (2007), *Mark*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 187.