

Following that reading I am going to speak about marriage, divorce and re-marriage.

These are sensitive and controversial matters.

Let us pray.

Gracious heavenly Father, we ask for your wisdom and understanding as we consider these words about marriage and divorce. Amen.

A Pharisee asks Jesus, as a test question, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife.

### **After a brief reference to Moses and the law Jesus takes them back to creation**

“ At the beginning of creation God made them male and female....”

When we look at the Genesis account not only humans were made male and female but the whole of creation was made with a view to reproduction and multiplying on earth.

Plants produce seed after their kind, trees fruit.

The fish and birds came next and were blessed by God and told to “be fruitful and increase in number. On through the creation story until he made man, male and female he made them. He blessed them also with the same words “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth!

### **We can all recognise and experience this amazing driving force in us and in the world.**

We see it in nature, the birds and the bees in our gardens, and so on.

It is one of the major aspects of life, even before puberty until right into old age our sexuality is a powerful fact of daily life.

### **It is something we should celebrate and certainly not be ashamed of. It is God’s plan for his creation.**

But in man’s case we are told both male and female were **created in God’s own image**. Whatever this statement means it clearly implies a certain dignity and status beyond the animal kingdom.

In various ways mankind reflects the character and person of God. And to emphasise this we read **“For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the 2 will become one flesh.”**

### **The plan includes family life:**

A father and mother who nurture and care for their growing children as a unique, separate family unit. It **implies stability, love and care**. A safe environment to bring up the children.

Then a son will leave the family home at maturity and take to himself a wife and they set up their separate unit. **Taking her to himself** suggests something exclusive. **She is not for sharing** but to be for himself, as he is exclusive to her.

And the 2 shall become one.

Of course this clearly includes sexual union, that’s an essential part of marriage but surely it includes much more. Husband and wife complement each other, though equal, they have different skills, different roles and combine together in providing for each other’s needs and the children’s when they arrive.

Even more amazing this marriage bond **is based on love** and love that implies commitment and even sacrifice.

I think the words of the CoE wedding service capture beautifully the essence of marriage as portrayed in the Bible

Let me just read the words of the Declaration : Firstly the groom is asked:

**“Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live.”**

**When you are in love there’s nothing you want to do more!**

That’s commitment. That’s Christian marriage.

Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus, tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.

**Far from treating his wife as chattel**, a man should love his wife sacrificially, putting her first, even putting his life on the line for her sake.

That’s Sacrificial love . That’s Christian marriage. If only men down the ages had followed this teaching.

No wonder Jesus added the words “What God has joined together let man not separate”

**The union, in God’s plan for mankind**, was meant to **be permanent**, not a casual passing phase, but **a lasting unit that fulfilled its role for family life and mutual love and care right into old age.**

What God has joined together let man not separate.

## **2. Divorce!**

**After the wonder of God’s plan even the word divorce rather shatters the dream !**

In the UK today more than a third of all marriages end in divorce. This is certainly a measure of how far mankind falls short of God’s will. But what should be the Christian approach?

In Matthews Gospel Jesus permits divorce on the grounds of “unfaithfulness” and adultery until recently has been the sole basis of divorce in this country for centuries, although implemented with an horrific bias in favour of men.

But what about Jesus’s words” What God has joined together let no man separate”? This statement has been taken as a solid command no one can break with the exception of adultery.

But it is perfectly possible to read it as a plea. It doesn’t say “You shall not separate what God has joined together” but “let no man separate”.

The intent is clear. The marriage bond is intended for life, to provide that security and stability in the family home. Not something to cast aside at the first sign of problems, loss of health, loss of finances, or a fancy for someone younger, prettier and so on.

But when love has gone, or there is abuse and violence then the intention of marriage is destroyed. Just as it is when adultery has destroyed the trust. The marriage unit has been broken. We need a plan “B”.

In this situation, people set God’s plea to one side and separate.

I find the latest English divorce laws which the CoE was active in helping formulate, pretty sensible in allowing irretrievable breakdown and unreasonable behaviour as a basis for applying for divorce.

Both the church and the State try to encourage reconciliation, counselling and all constructive aids to prevent a break up.

It should not be too easy, or quick.

Those concerned should be encouraged to reconsider before breaking up the home. Where there are children break up can be so traumatic it lives with them and affects them for the rest of their lives.

Remarriage?

The next question is the matter of remarriage. The words in our reading, and repeated twice in Matthew "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries again commits adultery and if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" have traditionally been accepted by the church as applying universally to prevent remarriage.

Until comparatively recently the church has refused to remarry almost anyone who has been divorced.

What can I say to this?

In the Matthew passage Jesus allowed divorce on the basis of adultery.

So that must be the context for his further statement. I see it like this:

A married man starts a relationship with another woman. He gets divorced from his first wife because he wants to marry the second. That sounds very much like adultery to me. Isn't that what Jesus is saying?

The great difficulty in all this is making laws. Firm statements that can't be changed. Was that what Jesus intended for all time or was it a response to Pharisees who were trying to test him, in a culture that made divorcing your wife so easy.?

In the CoE today the policy is to let the local vicar make that decision. Some ministers absolutely refuse all such requests, others are supposed to interview the couple, tease out whether they think they can or not.

We can all recognise this as a difficult position for a vicar. It's surely not one of their favourite responsibilities.

**But I think we all know people, perhaps people in your own family, or close friends, who having had a first marriage that ended in divorce, found love with someone else, remarried, and today enjoy a fulfilling and happy relationship through which many wounds have been healed and sadness turned to joy.**

I dare to think that would be pleasing to the Lord Jesus and be what he would wish.

**I have tried to interpret the Bible passages and explain the current situation with regard to divorce and remarriage. But finally I would like to suggest what should be our attitude today as Christians. how we should respond.**

In the debate about divorce and remarriage, as well as all the other difficult moral and social problems of today I worry that the church is sending people away. Of course we have to present God's holy and righteous standards. But we also have to cope with human sin. Jesus managed this wonderfully.

If someone wants to be married and we say "no" its as if we say, "Sorry, but you don't belong here, sorry, but what you have done is beyond the pale. The church cant and wont help you.

I don't believe Jesus ever sent anyone away. He may have said things to people and they decided themselves, to go away. Jesus never lowered his standards.

But what He showed was grace. At times scandalous grace. It offended people. The gospels are full of examples.

**Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector**, a collaborator, an extortioner of money, hated by virtually everyone, Jesus deliberately called him out of the sycamore-fig tree and invited himself for a meal, attended by lots of other tax collectors. He said he had come to seek and to save the lost.

In the parable of **the prodigal son**, the son behaved dreadfully and yet was received home joyfully and unreservedly by his father. It certainly scandalised the older brother.

To the woman taken in adultery. Jesus said he didn't condemn her but told her to go and sin no more. What do you think would have happened if she did it again? Would he have forgiven her again?

I hear the words of Peter. Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother if he sins against me? 7 times? No said Jesus, 7 X 70.

Every week we come to church and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

Every time we say the Lord's prayer we ask Him to forgive us our sins.

How many times in your life do you think you have asked for God's forgiveness and expected to receive it? **It's called grace. We don't deserve it.**

Of course some sins might be thought more serious than others.

There has to be true repentance and not a slick, thoughtless request.

But we are a blessed people. We receive forgiveness, enjoy fellowship together and with God Himself.

We anticipate eternal life at the resurrection. God is a God of grace. Its not what we deserve!

May the things that characterises us as Christians **be love, compassion and grace** even to those who we may think don't deserve it. We too have received grace, amazing grace, abundant grace. It's the grace of God.