

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 6 October 2024
Genesis 2.18-24; Ps 8; Heb.1.1-4; 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

There are things I look forward to, like holidays and *All Creatures Great and Small*, and there are others I resent and put off for as long as possible, like cleaning the car or filling in the annual tax return. I can't in all honesty say that I have been looking forward to preaching on the readings we have heard today, and this is why. The Genesis story of the creation of woman out of a man's spare rib has been used to relegate women to a subservient role and in some quarters it still is. Hebrews is the hardest epistle to get one's head round, largely because it requires a close familiarity with a range of Old Testament texts and an ability to follow the twists and turns of a complex argument about how they point to Jesus as God's Chosen One. Jesus's teaching on marriage and divorce is difficult for other reasons. It needs to be read alongside equivalent passages in the other Synoptic Gospels and others in the Epistles which don't altogether agree with one another.

But there's another reason, a more personal one. There are wonderful marriages of all kinds, and I know that many of you can testify to that; ones which blossom from youthful romance into deep and lasting affection and companionship. I've seen here and elsewhere how seriously people take their marriage vows, especially 'for better, for worse, in sickness and in health', as they care for partners whose physical or mental health has become fragile. It is humbling and moving to witness such devotion. But there's another side to the story. Both my paternal grandfather and my father went through painful divorces at a time when divorce was considered shameful. While at boarding-school, aged 8 or 9, my father received a letter from his father which said that his mother had run off with another man and that he would never see her again. What that does to someone so young I hardly dare imagine. It was over thirty years before he saw her again, by which time the man she had run off with and by whom she had three more sons had died. A reconciliation took place. Indeed, I have vivid recollections of my grandfather – the same Ernest I told you about a month ago who used to show us his false teeth under the table – coming to our church when he visited us with one wife on

each arm. My father's first marriage broke down irretrievably while he was a missionary in Madagascar, and as many of you know, he married again, this time to a Jewish refugee girl my grandparents had taken in in August 1939, and who is here among us now.

So you'll perhaps understand my reluctance to pontificate about such topics. Nor would I be surprised if some of you didn't have similar experiences. For far too long the Church has treated women as second-class citizens, despite the fact that they are often its most loyal members; and for far too long the Church has been obsessed with policing relationships and telling people what they may and may not do, usually claiming biblical authority for it. I've heard too many cosy sermons extolling the wonders of married life. Not only have I and others felt excluded, I've seen too much of people trapped in loveless relationships and sometimes abusive ones to feel comfortable with that. There was a lovely lady called Anne I knew from my earliest years, who was like a second mother to me. She was stuck in a rotten marriage and was eventually divorced. Years later she became close to the minister of the church she attended, himself trapped in a loveless marriage to a wife who refused to divorce him. In due course Anne and the minister moved in together. Technically this was adultery. Spiritually it was anything but, a deep mutual love which healed many wounds of the past. To give it its credit – we're in the 1980s now – the church authorities accepted this and allowed Mike to continue his ministry until he died. Anne was a deeply spiritual woman who, despite all that had happened to her, radiated a sense of calmness and peace, even when she became ill and died of mouth cancer in her early 60s. These are real, human stories I'm telling you, and no doubt they would attract mutterings of disapproval in some quarters. But when I turn to the Jesus of the Gospels, I hear only understanding and compassion, and I wonder about the difference.

It's in our personal relationships that we are at our most vulnerable, make our worst mistakes, and hurt people even without meaning to. That's why laying down, let alone imposing, hard and fast rules which everyone must adhere to can be oppressive and even destructive. You may have noticed that Jesus could be a bit of a rule-breaker, especially when it came to strict observance of the Sabbath. He wants us to understand that rules

aren't gods we must unquestioningly obey, they exist to help us live in harmony with ourselves, with one another and with God. In Mark 10 he sets out the ideal of marriage but also recognises that human weakness will often fall short of it and that there needs to be a mechanism for dealing with failure. We all know, surely, how liable we are to fall short of the ideals to which we aspire, and if that were the end of the story what hope would there be for us, other than to muddle through as best we can and carry the burden of failure with us? That is not the way of Jesus. He speaks of the power of forgiveness and the new beginnings that lie before us when we take to heart his truth and look to him for life. We need the ideal, the picture of wholly mutual, trusting and respectful relationships which grows through a lifetime of commitment, but we also need a much less judgmental and legalistic approach to how we deal with breakdowns in relationships. I do not hear Jesus telling anybody that they can have no place in his community because they don't fit into this category or that. I do hear him saying, as he does each time the invitation to communion is given, 'I will never turn away anyone who comes to me'. And whether that person is single or married, straight or gay or transgender, whatever colour their skin may be or anything else that we choose to give a label to, I stand by his word and I hope and believe that this church community does too.

Even so, there are significant things to say even about the more problematic aspects of these readings. I'm sure you've heard that Genesis begins with two creation stories, quite different from each other. First come the seven days, with humankind made on the sixth, male and female together. Then comes the second, with the man created out of the dust and placed in the Garden of Eden. You'll also know that Adam and Eve are not names at all, they are simply English versions of the Hebrew words for a man and a woman. The point of this second story is not, I think, that the woman is made from the man. That is scientific nonsense, especially as we now know that all embryos begin as female and that sexual differentiation doesn't take place until after a few weeks. But it's not meant to be science. It's an ancient story which, like all the others in the early chapters of Genesis, represents early humans grappling with all the puzzling things about our existence. If you start with the questions they are asking rather than the details of the story you'll

understand them better. How is it that pain and evil exist in God's good creation? Why do people murder each other? Why are there natural disasters? Why don't we understand one another better? The stories don't provide clear answers and are often quite mysterious. Here, Adam, the man, is lonely, incomplete, as we all are without other people who love us and we them. Loneliness is one of the great problems of our time, especially for people left on their own in old age, those who find it hard to make friends, those who feel alone even when surrounded by crowds. We need each other in order to flourish. That's what the story tells us. Unless you are one of those very rare people who is happy to be a hermit, all of us need friends and companions. It's quite touching how in the story God brings all the creatures to the man in the hope that one of them might be his helper or partner. The man gives them names, as we still do, but they can't satisfy that need. So God comes up with the spare rib plan. Before you dismiss this as insulting or weird, probe deeper and you'll see that at its heart it is telling us that we are each part of one another: men and women, Israelis and Palestinians, Americans and Iranians, Ukrainians and Russians, and that when we behave as if we weren't we end up destroying part of ourselves.

Dare I end with a word about the Epistle to the Hebrews? Just the bit we heard earlier. The author is wrestling with the meaning of Psalm 8 and the question it asks: what are we humans that God should care about us? And what does it mean that we are crowned with glory and honour and that all things are subject to us, when clearly they're not? The author knows that. But what we do see and can know is Jesus, who embraced the limitations of being human, and though he was subjected to suffering and death is crowned with glory and honor has become the source of salvation, that is, he delivers us from everything that holds us down and opens up a new path of life for his followers to walk. More than that, he calls them his brothers and sisters. That is a revolutionary idea. Gods, even in human form, are to be feared, worshipped, appeased. Jesus is altogether different. In him God has made a home in the middle of all the mess of being human and has been subject to all the hatred and violence of which human beings are capable, because he dared to confront the evil in our hearts and show us that this is not who we

are. Those who turn to him for help are members of his family and that family does not shut people out, unless they exclude themselves.

‘We are not our own’, we sang earlier. We are part of one another and the differences between us are given to enrich us, not to set us against each other. I have learned so much of the power of love from marriage and friendship, from people who open their lives to welcome strangers and make them feel at home. I have learned, too, of the power of forgiveness, of its power to repair strained and broken relationships. And I have learned these things most of all from Jesus Christ as he comes to us from the words of Scripture, through sign and symbol in the sacraments, and in his extraordinary ability to get to the heart of the matter when people come to him in need, as we all do. If all we do in our churches is to mirror the divisions of society around us and repeat its prejudices, we betray him. We can descend into tribalism, think of ourselves as belonging to one community and enemies of another. There’s a lot of that around. But in the community founded by Christ, of which we here are a tiny outpost, we are asked to live first and foremost instead as brothers and sisters in the wider family he gave his life to build. When we do that, we follow in his steps, we learn his gentle lessons of love, and little by little we are changed by him, become more like him as we make our way through this troubled world.