

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Mark 10: 1-31: February 3rd: Some Notes

Content: The Pharisees test Jesus on the controversial issue of divorce. Jesus' disciples check out the Jesus answer. Jesus and children; and us and children. Who is "good"? The Law and Discipleship. Riches and Discipleship. The Kingdom.

Divorce: This discussion takes place not far from where John the Baptist lost his head for criticising Herod and his adultery with and marriage to the (later) divorced wife of his brother.. The Pharisees were well aware of the sensitivities, though they may have been genuinely interested in establishing what Jesus thought about the two extremes of official Jewish teaching: 1) divorce by the man of his wife only for adultery; 2) divorce by the man of his wife if he didn't like her cooking or didn't like her hair. As Mark probably knew, Roman law allowed the wife to divorce, but Jewish law treated the wife as a possession for the man to dispose of. Strictly speaking, Moses didn't authorise divorce. He just said something about re-marriage if there was a divorce. Incidentally, the different Gospel accounts of what Jesus said are different. Not all post the adultery exception.

We all come to this discussion with the burden and blessing of personal beliefs and personal experience, and our knowledge of "successful" and "unsuccessful" marriages among friends and acquaintances. Culturally, there is perhaps something of a tendency to see marriage as a useful way of putting some sort of structure and legal clarity around having sex and, if that's how it works out, having children. I think Jesus, the Christ, is saying that Christ is present in every individual, and in every mutually chosen relationship (or in the case of parents and children every given relationship) between individuals. I wanted to say "in every relationship", but I struggle with applying this to abusive relationships in which there is a perpetrator and a victim rather than two partners. This is tricky, because the universal presence of Christ means Christ is present (though not very visible) in scoundrels. Some of the Bible relationships which speak most powerfully of the presence of Christ are not married relationships: David and Jonathan, Naomi and Ruth, Mary and Elizabeth, for example.

The presence of Christ in the two individuals constituting a partnership and in that partnership itself does not mean that the legal arrangement has to continue regardless of evident damage to both parties and perhaps more widely. (After all, Jesus recognised that one partner becoming a disciple was going to break up some marriages!)

Children: Jesus on the way to the cross wants to spend time exchanging smiles with children. Clearly, both parents and children saw him as child-friendly. This is more than just getting a blessing from a Rabbi for luck. We can identify various admirable child-like qualities... though probably also think of some children sometimes not fully and consistently displaying humility, innocence, trust, acceptance, obedience, etc. But maybe the fundamental point is that "The Kingdom" is not earned by avoiding bad things and doing good things. It is gifted by a loving God. Christians can become fixated with earning

Brownie points, and by the weird notion that we have to contend with a God who has to be persuaded not to zap us for breaking rules he knows we are quite incapable of keeping. Hard to get the right language or the right pictures, but the Heaven thing, if it is to make sense at all, is not a tiny minority of First Class passengers travelling Pullman Express to DisneyPlus, while the cattle trucks ship everyone else off to an eternal Auschwitz; but the single class carriages of the Divine excursion train taking us all to an unimaginable future of New Heaven and New Earth – in the company of people we didn't want to be seen dead with, but will enjoy LIFE with. (See Jesus' gentle reminder to Peter at the end of this section.)

Rules and Riches: The young man is enthusiastic, confident in not having done anything wrong. Jesus takes to him, but points to the need for positive virtues and attitudes, not just keeping your nose clean. Be careful with interpretation here. The background was a Jewish strand of thought that saw prosperity as a sign of God's favour. Being poor is not virtuous, and being rich is not being bad. Having become very rich, Bill Gates has done a great deal of good – and his position enables him to promote further good. If the rich women who supported the early disciples had just given their money away, instead of using their resources and carrying on making more money, would we have had the Acts of the Apostles?

Peter uses his Twitter Feed as always, and gets a rather mixed response. When we get to the next section, we shall see that the Zebedee family seems not to have been listening carefully to this exchange. They heard the bits they wanted to hear!