

Life as a Divorcee

Matthew 19:1-12

During our morning services at present, we are going through a series we've entitled "Life in all its fullness" where we are looking at different aspects of life.

In the 1956 film 'Carousel' life was described as a merry-go-round with its ups and downs. Carl Sandburg said "Life is like an onion; you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep."

Forrest Gump described life as a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get.

I don't know what your favourite chocolate is in the chocolate box. One of my favourites is the hazelnut in caramel, or what Quality Street simply call "the purple one" because it has a purple wrapper. When you bite into a hazelnut in caramel, you get that lovely taste of milk chocolate, quickly followed by gooey soft caramel but there's also the nutty flavour and texture of the hazelnut in the centre. The whole thing combines together to give you a pleasurable taste sensation that is thoroughly enjoyable. Sometimes life is like that. Those good times that are full of joy and pleasure. Times that you don't want to end, memories that you treasure, and given the chance, you would like to experience it again.

For me, the chocolate that I've never really appreciated is the coffee cream. For some of you, that may well be your favourite. But for me, the coffee cream is a wasted space in the box where they could have put a decent chocolate. Usually I will avoid a coffee cream if I can, but there's always those times when you take a chocolate at random and you put it in your mouth whole and bite into it, only to find out that it is a coffee cream! At that moment all of the anticipated pleasure associated with eating chocolates goes out of the window. All I'm left with is a bitter taste in my mouth that is not at all pleasurable.

Sometimes life is like that isn't it? The experiences that leave a bitter taste in your mouth. I would much rather that coffee creams were not in the box, but you get a mixed selection of chocolates and nine times out of ten, they are there. Life is like that; it's a mixed selection of chocolates and some experiences in life we wish were not there but they are.

This morning we are looking at one of those coffee cream experiences, one of the layers of life that makes you weep, one of the 'downs' of life as we look this morning at the subject of divorce.

Divorce is something that is part of life for an increasing number of people. According to the latest figures, around 40% of marriages in the UK now end in divorce. That means that many of us will be either directly or indirectly affected by divorce. Almost all of us will know someone close to us who has been affected by divorce. In spite of the high percentage of divorces it doesn't seem to stop people wanting to get married. People are now marrying later than they were 50 years ago (the average age for marriage is now 28) but most people still have a desire to get married at some point. The difference seems to be the way in which marriage is viewed. According to research carried out by Channel 4, many people no longer view marriage as a life-long commitment.¹ In fact, many people go into marriage with provision already made for when they will inevitably break up. It is becoming an increasingly popular practice to have a pre-nuptial agreement where the terms for each person on the marriage ending are agreed before the marriage has even begun.

The way that divorce is viewed has also changed. A few years ago, not too long before coming to Ashurst Drive Baptist Church, I was invited to a divorce party. It was a colleague at work who had been trying to divorce his wife and when the decree absolute came through, he threw a party to celebrate.

Even in church people have different views on divorce. Divorce has often been the subject of theological debate and it was no different in Bible times. This is exactly what we see going on when we come to Matthew 19. We are in the middle of a theological argument based on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

¹ <http://www.channel4.com/health/microsites/F/family/21st/families.html>

¹ If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, ² and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, ³ and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, ⁴ then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

It appears that at the time of Moses, provision was made to allow husbands to divorce their wives. Everyone accepted that this was the case, that in certain circumstances God allowed divorce. The question being debated was what those circumstances were. How should the law be interpreted? Does the law mean that a man can divorce his wife for any little thing she does that he doesn't like, or because he is bored with her, or does the law only allow for divorce where there has been marital unfaithfulness?

The Pharisees came trying to trap Jesus with this question. Their hope was probably that Jesus would make light of the law, then they would be able to turn the people against Jesus for having a disregard for God's law as given to Moses, especially as divorce was such a common practice.

There is an important cultural difference here that we need to appreciate. Notice that these laws for divorce only apply to men divorcing their wives. This is not a mutually agreed annulment of the marriage as we would understand divorce today. The context of Deuteronomy 24 is that a Jewish man (not the woman) had the right to reject his wife in a one-way declaration against which there was no appeal. So in actual fact, this is a very different context to today.

It appears that in a similar way to today, men were finding any excuse they could to legally divorce when they had become tired of their wives. They used the provisions made in the law of Moses as a kind of get out clause to their marriage commitments. But it was undeniable that under certain circumstances, God had allowed divorce. This was part of the Torah, God's law from the beginning of Israel's history. And this is what the Pharisees were using in an attempt to trap Jesus.

In answer to their question, Jesus goes back much further. They have tried to trap Jesus into speaking against a law that had been established for years. But Jesus goes back to the law that God established at the very beginning, long before the time of Moses. Essentially Jesus is challenging them back. They came asking about legal reasons for divorce. Jesus' reply is "why are you looking for ways to divorce when you should really be looking for ways to maintain a healthy marriage?"

Jesus goes on to explain that the original context of marriage is that a man and a woman become "one flesh". In the context of original marriage (as God intended / created it to be) divorce is an impossible concept. The two are no longer two, they have become one. In its original context, It's like adding sugar to a cup of tea. Once the two come together they fuse into one thing. You can't at that point change your mind and decide that you would prefer your tea without sugar. The two are virtually impossible to separate.

The Pharisees ask "so why then does the law of Moses allow for divorce?"

⁷"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Note Jesus' reply:

⁸Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

Jesus has already explained the way that God intended things to be from the beginning. That was God's ideal, the perfect world that God created, the perfect relationship between man and woman.

Some say that Adam and Eve had the perfect marriage because he didn't have to hear about all the men she could have married, and she didn't have to hear about how well his mother cooked!

Notice that in God's perfect relationship between man and woman, man is not over woman, they are one. It has been suggested that it is only after sin enters the world that man becomes subject to the ground from which he came and woman is then subject to man from which she came. This is not God's ideal, the world is not as perfect as God would like it to be because he has given us free will.

Because the world is not perfect people have the choice to do things God's way, or to do things as they feel is best for them. When we get into a habit of doing things in a way that suits us, we can become very self-centred people and our hearts can become hardened towards God's ways. We can forget that we are supposed to be one flesh and instead we can become selfish.

A man and a woman were travelling on a long over-night train journey. They were not married and had never met one another before but they were put into the same sleeping compartment in the train. Obviously they were in separate beds. It was a fairly cold night and at one point during the night the man asked the woman if she could reach a blanket for him out of the cupboard. The woman replied, "I have a better idea, just for tonight why don't we pretend that we are married?" "Wow! That's an excellent idea" replied the man. "Good" said the woman, "you can get your own blanket."

Sadly, in some marriages, that's not that far off the truth. When attitudes in marriage become very self-centred, the relationship can begin to deteriorate. Sometimes relationships deteriorate badly. And it is not surprising that we find the subject of divorce a difficult moral dilemma. It is a subject we are torn over today, it was a subject that the religious leaders were torn over in the first century and in fact it is a subject that God is torn over.

Malachi 2:16 says:

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.

Quite clearly there it states that God hates divorce, it goes against his design, it is not his ideal. But sometimes the best option isn't available. God's best option would be for a husband and wife to always be as in love with one another as the day they married. But sometimes that option simply isn't there. God hates divorce but he also hates seeing his people hurt. If you look up Malachi 2:16 in your Bibles you will probably find a footnote relating to the word 'himself' to say that this could be translated as 'his wife'. So the verse would then read:

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering *his wife* with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.

That is God's dilemma. He hates divorce because it destroys people. If a man and a woman in marriage become one flesh then to separate them is going to tear them apart. That is usually the result of divorce. It damages people on both sides. But as much as God hates divorce, he also hates to see husbands committing adultery, wives committing adultery, husbands beating their wives, wives beating their husbands. What does God do when a couple is being torn apart within a marriage? Divorce damages people, but sometimes people are being damaged within their marriage.

As most of you will know, I had cancer when I was 21 years old. That cancer was destroying my body from the inside. In order to remove the cancer my body had to go through some pretty gruelling treatment. As a result of that, my body has some irreversible damage. But that damage did not destroy my body anywhere near as much as the cancer would have done if it was left unchecked. My ideal situation would have been that I didn't have cancer, but the best option wasn't available.

Sometimes a divorce, though damaging, sometimes it is less damaging than staying in a loveless marriage. It is not God's ideal, but it is a concession that God made as a means of damage limitation for the people he loves. An option that exists when the best option isn't available.

Nevertheless, people are damaged by divorce. People are torn apart and broken by divorce. Both the couple and people around them. Often there are feelings of guilt. It's worth remembering that God's love is unconditional. People tend to think of God as an angry parent waiting to say "I told you you would get hurt." But I think God is more compassionate than that. I think that when we weep,

God weeps with us, when we hurt, God hurts with us, and he is there with his arms open to comfort us. If that's how God is, then we as a church, as his body, need to have the same attitude towards broken people.

God is even compassionate towards the guilty party. Consider David. He was chosen as Israel's king, a leader to lead God's chosen people. Yet how many of God's commands did he break? – Adultery, murder, theft, coveting... There were consequences to David's sin but God's love for David did not alter, it is unconditional. We could say the same about countless people in the scriptures to whom God demonstrated unconditional love.

Jesus' attitude was to restore broken people. The church should be a place where broken people can find love, comfort and support. The church should be a place where broken people can find healing and where the vulnerable can find security.

Often people who have been through a divorce struggle to cope financially but a greater struggle is the feeling of being stripped of dignity. The sense that you can no longer hold your head up high in public. Wasn't it Jesus' way to draw alongside people who felt like that? Wasn't it his way to befriend people who felt like they hadn't got a friend in the world? We are his followers, his church, should we not do the same?

Another group of people that get hurt by divorce is children. I have seen divorce enough times in my family to conclude that where there are children, they are ALWAYS affected by divorce. Often children feel it is their fault. They blame themselves for their parents' break-up. Children are often caught in the crossfire even after a divorce. They have to get used to having a relationship with their parents according to a timetable. If a boy wants to talk to his dad about man stuff, he will now have to wait until it's 'dad's turn' to see him. The same applies to girls. Children of course, held a special place in the heart of Jesus. He encouraged us to learn from their example, and he warned us that they are fragile and need to be treated with special care.

The thing I want to finish with is this. You can only start from where you are now. If you are on a journey and you find yourself hopelessly lost and you ask someone for directions, it is no use to you to wish you were somewhere else. You are where you are and you need to start from there. What has gone before is now rather irrelevant, you can do nothing about it. So if you feel guilty about the past then let it go. That is in the past, there is nothing you can do about it now. What is more important is what you do next. And you need to start from where you are.

Likewise, if you are giving someone directions who has taken a wrong turning, it's no use to them to say "oh, you really shouldn't have come this way, you should be way over there." You need to accept where people are now and help them to find their way.

So divorce is not God's ideal, but in some circumstances it is the best option. Divorce does happen, it is a fact of life for many people and our role as a church is not to condemn but to be Jesus and extend the love of God to comfort hurting people and to restore broken lives.