

## Address for 3 October by Nigel Guthrie

I was rather puzzled when I arrived as curate in my first parish to find that the Vicar, who was a lovely man, wouldn't remarry those who had been divorced, but would offer a service of blessing. I couldn't quite work out why, if a couple were suitable to bless in church, they weren't suitable to marry in church? But I soon discovered that there were quite a few clergy who operated the same policy. It seemed unfair to me that remarriage should not be generally offered to couples, not least because often one of the couple was getting married for the first time. And then there were plenty of people who lived together with a partner without marrying but then split up and eventually wanted to marry someone else. There was no bar to them getting married in church!

So, when I became a Vicar myself I agreed with the PCC that we should generally allow those who had been divorced to remarry in church, subject to them falling within the scope of the Bishop's guidelines which insisted that matters such as the maintenance of any children from a previous marriage were resolved before new marriage could happen.

Over the years matters have moved on and the remarriage of divorcees in church has become much more accepted, though not by everybody. And now people can get married almost anywhere and city parishes like our own are little used for weddings, although for me it heightens the joy and privilege of officiating at them when they do come around.

Of course my training vicar, and the many other clergy who wouldn't have married a divorcee in church, had a pretty clear steer on what to do from the gospel reading we heard today. The pharisees were, as usual, trying to trick Jesus into saying something that would contradict the Jewish law. But instead Jesus pointed out that it was only because of their hardness of heart that a man was allowed to divorce a woman. In the Jewish law only men were allowed to divorce their wives. Wives were not allowed to divorce their husbands.

So, if you listened carefully to the gospel reading, you might be wondering why 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. Professor Morna Hooker suggests that this verse has been added in a society where Roman law gave the woman this right. In other words this verse was very likely added to the

gospel after the time of Jesus to bring his teaching 'up to date' for a new context. Which is very interesting because it means that, as we know from other additions to what we believe to be Jesus' words, interpretation of his teaching started almost as soon as his words had been uttered.

Which you would have thought would be a problem for those who feel that the words of the bible must always be interpreted the same for all time! But in fact many people do take a literalistic view of the words of the bible and not least when it comes to matters of relationships and marriage.

There is no doubt that Jesus believed divorce was a last resort. But don't we all? I've never met a couple who set out in marriage wanting to get divorced. But we can't avoid the reality that for people who end up in unloving or worse, abusive and violent relationships divorce is much better than remaining married. We are called to make loving and enduring relationships in our lives, whether these are marriages, partnerships or friendships. And those of us who have had the amazing blessing of being happily married can only want the same for those around us.

But when we look at other fundamental elements of Christian teaching about our relationships we realise that the church has not (to put it mildly) always got it right in its teaching and practice. The central idea that Christ has died for our sins so that we might be forgiven means that we must always hold out the possibility of a new start for those whose relationships have gone wrong. And then there is Jesus' teaching about not judging others and his merciful treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery. In contrast to the teaching and practice of Jesus all too often the church has been quick to pass judgment and to cast the first metaphorical stone. Our judgement must always be tempered with mercy because God treats us all with his mercy which is inexhaustibly great. Yes, we are called to repentance for the hurts we have done to others but we are not condemned.

So the Church, or at least the Church of England, has been on quite a journey in discovering how it should minister to those who are divorced and wishing to remarry in church. What journey might God now be leading us on in learning how we should minister to those who wish to have same sex relationships blessed? A number of us engaged with the 'Living in Love and Faith' course which the Bishops are encouraging us to study this year and to feed back our thoughts. The process will then continue next year hopefully leading to a new statement of Anglican teaching in the sphere of sexuality and relationships. If you haven't looked at the material it is

well worth while, especially the story videos which can all be accessed free. And a kind parishioner has donated her copy of the Living in Love and Faith book so that someone else can use it! Do ask me if you would like it.

Many of us believe that it is time that same sex couples should be able to have their faithful relationships blessed in church. But we're also realistic in knowing that there will not be unanimity in this. We need to find a way forward that allows us to express the love which God has for them as much as for anyone and to affirm their desire to live in faithful and loving partnership. The journey we have travelled in our teaching about remarriage after divorce has not been quick or easy but it has led us to a place in which people are better respected and in which the realities of failure and the possibility of rebirth are recognised and celebrated. Perhaps such a process can soon begin which will allow us to find a more holistic and humane way to treat all those who deeply desire to affirm their loving commitment in God's church?