

Lessons Job 1: 1; 2: 1 – 12 Hebrews 1: 1 – 4; 2: 5 – 12 St Mark 10: 2 – 16

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, by whose grace alone in all our temptations we can endure; grant us always the help of Your loving kindness; that in all our adversities we may not waver, nor be moved from our confidence in You; but out of weakness be made strong, may ever stand fast in the confession of Your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews cites the psalmist:

**What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honour....**

Hebrews 2: 6 – 7

Let me begin with those very hard words which Jesus spoke concerning divorce. Jesus is asked by the religious party, the Pharisees, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He replies, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They cited what Moses had said: a man may write a certificate of divorce and dismiss his wife. Jesus said:

From the beginning of creation, God ‘made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.

We are not told how the Pharisees replied to this answer. We are told that afterwards, when Jesus was alone with the disciples, he told them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a

woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’

These are hard words, but all is not what it seems.

I have in the past cited the Old Testament scholar, Robert Davidson, and I love, love, what he said. Speaking at a conference in Glasgow organised in support of sufferers of HIV/AIDS, Professor Davidson said, ‘In the hands of the ignorant, the Bible will confirm their every prejudice.’ As I reflected on the hard words of Jesus, I read in one commentary that this passage on divorce makes it clear that Jesus stands for the sanctity of marriage, that there are no circumstances in which divorce is acceptable and that this passage is proof, if proof were needed, that Jesus disapproves of homosexuality. In his novel, *1984*, George Orwell wrote that one of the slogans of the Party was ‘IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.’

The Scripture states that, in asking Jesus a question about divorce, the Pharisees were testing Jesus, testing Him. What does that mean? The Pharisees were asking Jesus the prophet about marriage and divorce. John the Baptist had not long been beheaded for his comments on the divorce of Herodias from Herod and her marriage to Herod Antipas. Jesus was clearly being tested and a wrong word might have cost him his head. Context is everything. In first century Palestine, there were two prevailing justifications for divorce: the first justification was the sexual impurity of the wife; she had been unchaste or an

adulterer; and, the second justification was no real justification at all, namely, that the husband had simply tired of his wife. There was no question that the wife had a right to divorce. How could she? In law, she was property. Into *this* context, Jesus says, ‘From the beginning of creation, God ‘made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’

What is Jesus saying? He is elevating the place of women in marriage and in society. Where the Jewish Law considered women as property with no right of divorce, Jesus reaches further back to the order of creation, in which God created male and female. In these creation narratives, there is equality. The whim of a husband is no justification for divorce. The abandonment of a wife, most often to poverty and social segregation, is not acceptable. To the disciples, Jesus said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.’ Did you hear those last two words: against *her*. On the face of it, these hard words of Jesus appear to say that there are no circumstances in which divorce is permissible but context is everything. In context, Jesus is demonstrating respect to women, acknowledging the supreme value of women and their equality with men in the eyes of God. They are not to be treated as property or discarded on a whim. They are made in the image of God. We cannot use these hard words of Jesus to say that divorce is never permissible – that is not the context of the question he faced - and we certainly

cannot use them to claim that Jesus stands against homosexuality. Men and women are made in the image of God and as such, as children of God, are to be respected, valued and cherished equally.

This leads me on to my text for today. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews quoted the psalmist, who said:

What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honour....

This week, Ardi, the *Ardipithecus ramidus* fossil, went on display. The fossil is the oldest specimen on the hominid branch and, it is claimed, takes us close, our closet yet, to the ‘missing link’, our common ancestor with the apes. What are we that God should be mindful of us: apes or the children of God, male and female, made in the image of God? We live in an age and culture in which religion, or the ideas about God, is not in vogue. Philosophy and much of the popular writing on the philosophy of science is atheistic. But we have been here before. Over two and a half thousand years ago in ancient Athens, many were wowed by the achievements of science and technology. The Parthenon, a temple to the goddess Athena, was a technological wonder and has inspired people ever since. We should not underestimate the power of ancient minds. Around the time of the construction of the temple to Athena, the philosopher, Parmenides, discovered or realised that the moon reflects the light of the sun – it

was not the source of its own light; Democritus postulated that the basic units of nature were atoms existing in a void; and Pythagoras worked out that day and night were far better explained by the earth going round the sun and not the other way about. From this intellectual and technological prowess came hubris; among many there grew up an insolent pride or presumption over the gods. Yet the philosophers were more circumspect, most notably Socrates. Plato records the last conversation of Socrates with his friends. Socrates was in prison awaiting execution. In his last hours, Socrates ponders the meaning of life and death. He said, ‘When I was a young man I was wonderfully keen on that wisdom which they call natural science, for I thought it splendid to know the causes of everything, why it comes to be, why it perishes and why it exists.’ Using the best science, sitting in prison, awaiting death, Socrates asked why he was there and the reply came:

I am sitting here because my body consists of bones and sinews, because the bones are hard and are separated by joints, that the sinews are such as to contract and relax, that they surround the bones along with flesh and skin which hold them together, then as the bones are hanging in their sockets, the relaxation and contraction of the sinews enable me to bend my limbs, and that is the cause of my sitting here with my limbs bent.

Socrates could have escaped prison and lived. His genes told him to escape, to survive, but Socrates sat in prison. Socrates decided that it was right to stay and die. The cause of his predicament was a moral one. Wittgenstein said, ‘We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life have not been put to rest.’ When he orbited the Earth, Yuri

Gagarin triumphantly declared, ‘I don’t see any God up here.’ In similar fashion, looking down a microscope, Richard Dawkins triumphantly declares, ‘There is no God and no purpose to the universe.’ The problem with a microscope is that its line of vision is very restrictive and one is never going to find morality and love on a slide, yet morality and love are the things for which people live and die. Science is terribly reductionist: we are more than our genes, more than our DNA, more than the bones and sinews and skin and flesh that comprise our physical frame. The psalmist said that God is mindful of us and that we are a little lower than the angels. Jesus said that we are made male and female and in the image of God.

There is more to humanity and God’s creation than the theories and measurements of natural science. In 2005, the TV naturalist, David Attenborough, broadcast his series, *Life in the Undergrowth*. Listen to the words of this biologist:

I think the thing that surprises you is that when you watch invertebrates normally, say spiders, you think, ‘well, they’re just spiders and mechanical little creatures.’ But when you start to film them, you discover that they have individual personalities. I mean, you can watch spiders of the same species, and some are lazy, some hard working, some don’t like light. They all have personalities, there’s no doubt about it.

Compare Attenborough’s words to the polished prose of the poet, priest and writer, Thomas Traherne, who has observed the ‘high stomached’ fly:

The infinite workmanship about his body, the marvellous consistence of his limbs, the most neat and exquisite distinction of his joints, the subtle and imperceptible ducture of his nerves, and endowments of his tongue, and ears, and eyes, and nostrils; the stupendous union of his soul and body, the exact and curious symmetry of all his parts, the feeling of his feet and the swiftness of his wings, the vivacity of his quick and active power.....

The personality of spiders, the divine treasures of the fly and the morality which burned in the heart of Socrates are human insights which do not fall within the measurement of natural science. The physicist and winner of the Templeton Prize, Paul Davies, says that he keeps asking the deep ‘why’ questions:

Why did we come to exist 13.7 billion years ago in a Big Bang?
Why are the laws of electromagnetism and gravitation as they are?
Why those laws? What are we doing here? And, in particular, how come we are able to understand the world? Why is it that we’re equipped with intellects that can unpick all this wonderful cosmic order and make sense of it? It’s truly astonishing.

Human beings share a sense of wonderment at the nature of the universe, they have morality penetrating every fibre of their mind and soul and....they experience love. In his recent book, *Beauty*, Roger Scruton is, among other things, critical of pornography. He is critical of pornography because it is a desecration of what we are and what we are capable of. He says:

There is the experience of falling in love....The face and body of the beloved are imbued with the most intense life....The beloved object demands that we cherish it, that we approach it with an almost ritualistic reverence. And there radiates from those eyes and limbs and words a kind of fullness of spirit that makes everything new.¹

¹ Roger Scruton *Beauty* p178

Sexual feeling, he argues, is a sensation which is a ‘tribute from one self to another...an incandescent revelation of what you are’² and is not be separated from us and sold as a commodity. We are so much more than our DNA and so much more than anything that can be learned about us from looking down a microscope. And, look at the dignity and integrity of Job in the face of suffering, the stature of character which he maintained through physical, emotional, mental and spiritual suffering. We are of this world and made for heaven. It is a great burden to me and to many that the churches and the Church of Scotland in particular is not more forthcoming in its defence of the faith. It seems that philosophers, physicists, biologist and poets are with one voice undermining the reductionism of science and atheists, like Dawkins, but the Church is obsessed with reforming its internal structures and obsessed with the sex gay men may be having. There is a world out there and the Church has two thousand years of wisdom and riches to offer. The psalmist and the author of Hebrews said:

What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honour....

He was dead right.

Amen.

² ibid 164