

Job 1: 1, 2: 1-10

Psalm 26

Hebrews 1: 1-4, 2: 5-12

St. Mark 10: 2-16

Pentecost 19 2021.

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”
St. Mark 10: 15

Have you ever watched an old pendulum clock?... The weight swings back and forth beneath the clock – first to one side, then to the other; back and forth, over and over again. The hands of the clock gradually move forward by the movement of the pendulum swinging beneath it...

The image of a swinging pendulum is a way of thinking about how we can correct ourselves – a social movement can go one way, and when it gets to the end of its arc, there is a corrective which goes back the other way, to the end of its arc... Meanwhile, time slowly progresses forward...

For example, a more right-wing government can be elected in a country, with an emphasis on restraint and fiscal responsibility... But then a movement develops – “What about programs for the poor?” Sooner or later, a more left-wing government is elected, and perhaps new social programs are introduced... After another few years go by, there are new objections – “With all this spending, how will we deal with a financial deficit?...” And what do you know? – another government with different priorities is elected... This is a picture, an image, about how we can sometimes go to extremes *one way* or *another*, and then self-correct...

Over the last 2000 years, we have seen these pendulum arcs in the life of the universal Church. In the early Church, sometimes there was a greater emphasis on the humanity of Jesus Christ – that he is one of *us*! Other teachers would emphasize Christ’s lordship and divinity, to whom everyone in heaven and earth will one day bow down... Sometimes in the life of the Church there has been a greater emphasis on our outward acts in the service of the Lord Jesus; at other times, an inner life of transformation is emphasized...

So we see in our history different emphases and corrections... But always we are progressing through time, learning and growing and becoming more obedient...

Some Christian churches have a specific set of teaching principles – assent to these doctrines, and you are one of us. If you don’t, you don’t belong... Anglican Christians have tried purposefully not to be too constraining in defining Church membership... We certainly don’t claim to be the only faithful expression of the gospel!... We affirm that the Bible message taken as a whole contains the core of what it is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We look to the early undivided Church to the core of what all Christians affirm – as we do, for instance, in the catholic Creeds of the whole Church...

In the up-ending world of the 1500's in Europe, Anglicans tried to steer a balance between what was regarded as bad innovations or traditions in the late Middle Ages (on one hand), and the radical European Reformers (on the other hand)... If you want to know what we believe, Anglican teachers have said, look at how we *pray*... As the old Anglican Prayer Book began, "It hath been the wisdom of the Anglican Church to keep the mean between the two extremes..." (*Via Media*)

No doubt there are times when we have failed to commend the hope which is in us. Along with many other Canadians, Anglican leaders have done a lot of soul-searching lately about our role in residential schools which are under our care... There are times, as individuals and as a Body, when we have failed in our Christian walk... But not *all* the time... There are times when we have steered this route, taking the best from all perspectives, and challenging disobedience and faithlessness...

When we look at the biographies of Jesus Christ, we have a supreme example of a life lived which challenges and corrects evil excesses, while driving forward the priorities of lives being utterly transformed for God, and his kingdom being established... This isn't imposing our points of view into the biblical record, but allowing the words and stories to bubble up and confront us, so that we are changed...

Today's third reading is from Mark 10. As it opens, Jesus Christ is being challenged on the thorny subject of marital divorce... Here, Jesus' opponents think they have him trapped: If he entertains divorce, they will certainly accuse him of being soft on marriage. If he forbids divorce, then he will be seen to be indifferent to human failings and brokenness...

None of us have to be biblical historians, but it's very helpful to know the context of marital practices in this ancient Jewish Palestinian culture... I'm sorry to say this, but it is true: If you were a *male* at this time, and wanted to divorce your wife, all you had to do was to find two witnesses and tell them clearly, "I want a divorce from my wife." That was it!... The woman might be left destitute; there was certainly a sense of shame and judgement. There are historical records of a man divorcing his wife for such trivial mistakes as burning toast...

If you were a woman, however, no such option was open to you... You might be married to an unrepentant, abusive alcoholic. You might be married to a serial adulterer who provided nothing for you or for your children. Tough beans for you!... There was sometimes terrible suffering as a result of this inequity...

The opening verses of John 8 are not included in our lectionary, and I think that's a real shame. You might recall that a group of scribes and Pharisees catch a couple in the very act of adultery... Notably, the man apparently was allowed to run off. The woman, broken, ashamed, and perhaps naked, is dragged in front of Jesus... The command of the

ancient law of Moses was that such a woman was to be stoned to death. Jesus' enemies stand ready to accuse him... There is a pregnant pause as Jesus draws on the ground, apparently collecting his thoughts. Then Jesus says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone..." The accusers are stunned by this reply and leave, beginning with the eldest... I imagine the Lord Jesus speaking with great love in his eyes as he asks the woman a question... No one has accused her. Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again..."

Notice that Jesus Christ *doesn't* say that committing adultery is all right. He specifically directs the woman to stop cheating on love... But neither does he condemn her...

We know nothing about this woman's background, or her future. We don't know what her marriage was like. (For those of us who are married, I say – Cherish your spouse. Invest in the relationship. Don't cheat on love...) We don't even know the woman's name. We know she is released from condemnation, as a result of her encounter with the Lord Jesus...

Back in today's reading in Mark 10, once again Jesus masterfully outdoes his accusers, as he affirms both the ideal of marriage in God's eyes, but also acknowledges human frailty and brokenness... I suggest the best way to read this passage is to see the Lord taking the best from both ends of the spectrum – holding up God's ideal; while also acknowledging the brokenness or damaged hearts which so many of us can carry – even into our marriage relationships...

Let's note that when Matthew records this encounter, Matthew records a detail which Mark has left out: Matthew records the Lord Jesus teaching that there can be circumstances when the bond of love is so broken, divorce might be the outcome. This is not something to rejoice in, but a time to seek healing...

Some of us might not be aware of a liturgical and pastoral tool which is available to Canadian Anglicans – a short worship service when a partner has left, and there is no chance of reconciliation... If I might tell a brief story, in a previous parish there was a young parishioner, Jennifer, who met and fell in love with her husband. They had a little boy together, but when the child was 3, Jennifer's husband stunned her by announcing that he wanted a divorce!... He took his clothes and a few things and left that day. He gave no explanation and refused any efforts at reconciliation... We used that little liturgy in the parish Church, with Jennifer and her parents and a few close friends attending. Jennifer found it enormously comforting. I mention this as a resource which might be helpful to someone you know...

Something Jennifer said to me I will carry forever: She said something like this: "When I met my husband, all kinds of people from this church welcomed me and celebrated me. Now he's left me for ever. I know that *God* still loves me. I know that *you* are supporting me and care for me. Where is everyone else?..."

When a marriage flounders; or when there's a death; or when a child gets in trouble, sometimes we don't know what to say... But let's not leave people hurting and hanging... We can even say: "I know what's happened. I don't know what to say. But I want to support you... Do you want a listening ear?..." And if we offer a listening ear, for heaven's sake, don't judge; don't give advice; don't repeat what is said in confidence...

It's not about *us* – it's seeing how God is trying to break through human brokenness, and *loving into* the situation... James 1: 19 reads, "Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger..."

After being confronted by his enemies about marriage and divorce, the Lord Jesus goes on his way, and his disciples try to shush some parents who wanted to bring their kids close to Jesus... Let's notice that Jesus stops his agenda, and he focuses on people who the disciples want to overlook – some little kids... Let's notice that process as we seek to share Christ's love – let's not be so busy with our agenda that we rush past people on the margins of our lives. Stop... Look... Listen...

It's such a sweet scene: The Lord Jesus scoops up a kid into his arms and snuggles the child. And the Son of God says, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it..." Let's maintain the highest standards, while also showing the greatest mercy possible for human weakness... And let's come to the Lord Jesus with the perspective of a child, into the loving arms which will never fail us, now and for ever.

Amen.