

## **It is not good for the man to be alone**

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on 7 October 2018 at St Peter's Wolvercote

*Ref: Genesis 2.18-24, Hebrews 1.1-4, 2. 5-12, Mark 10.2-16*

The Lord God said *"It is not good for the man to be alone"*. An essential statement of principle right at the beginning of the Bible. Human beings are not created to be alone. Although the Early Church had a rather keen interest in the solitary life, in hermits, chastity and celibacy, in the Bible it's assumed that human beings will live their lives in relationship with others, the normal expectation for human flourishing.

It's interesting that the first answer offered in Genesis to our human need for relationships is the provision of animals. For those of us who are dog or cat owners it's nice to know that building relationships with animals comes first in the Bible. So it's not a new idea, seeming to be something about the way we're created.

Of course, relationships with animals cannot entirely take the place of relationships with human beings. We all need other people – people we know, people we care about, people we share something in common with, people who we feel understand us. We may find those relationships in many ways - marriage, family, friendship or in Christian fellowship.

Our readings today focus on marriage. The deep and mysterious bond between man and woman is described in beautifully poetic language in our reading from Genesis. Jesus, though not married himself, clearly had the highest opinion of marriage. In our Gospel reading he not only quotes from that vivid language in Genesis but adds to it in his own words: *"So they are no longer two, but one flesh"*. And those words at every church wedding: *"Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder."*

There's no need for me to extol the value of Christian marriage. Suffice to say that, for all its challenges, I agree with Genesis and with Jesus that marriage is an amazing gift of God – surely the highest gift of God in Creation.

But what happens when it fails and falls apart – what then? What about those for whom the traditional ideal of a Christian marriage between a man and woman just won't work, because they have a same-sex orientation? What about those who are single, whether through choice or because that's just how it's worked out for us? What about those of us who are widowed?

I'm not going to pretend to have all the answers, but I will offer a few thoughts in response to all these different situations we may find ourselves in.

To start, we need to be honest. We are fallible human beings, and however much we believe in the sanctity of marriage, and however hard we work at it, sometimes it just doesn't work out. If we find ourselves in that position, what should we do with our Gospel reading today and these seemingly severe words of Jesus? I think we need to understand their context. In Jewish society in the time of Jesus it was easy for a man to divorce his wife. There were plenty of reasons he could find or excuses he could give for why he felt she didn't come up to scratch. He could basically dump her and marry somebody else. This marriage law seems quite liberal, but actually it was deeply oppressive. It was one sided. A man could divorce his wife but she could not divorce him. So an

apparently liberal law meant that a wife had no security. It was easy for a man to ditch his wife just because he liked another woman. And worse still she would probably be left destitute.

I don't believe Jesus meant to introduce the idea that marriage is indissoluble. I think he saw a gross injustice here, and he wanted to protect women from being treated like a disposable commodity. In effect Jesus is giving the woman equal value with the man, and forbids men from ever treating a woman like a possession that can be discarded.

I think Jesus is saying to men – if you divorce your wife to marry another woman, just because you have met someone who you like better, that is legalised adultery.

But what does it mean for us in our different society today? I have conducted many weddings of divorcees in church, often beautiful and moving occasions. I have also, on very rare occasions, reluctantly said no. One of the questions we ask when one or both of couple are divorced and want to re-marry is, how much time and space has there been since the breakdown of the previous marriage. In effect the principle is that you didn't divorce your previous partner just because you like this new partner better. Rather, if your previous marriage has broken down irretrievably, and now you have the opportunity for a fresh start and a new beginning, then the Christian Gospel says yes, God does offer us forgiveness and a new start.

I am glad that we in the church have moved on, and that our response to marriage breakdown and divorce is not to condemn but to offer comfort and help, reassurance and affirmation, and to help each other find healing.

Today when we think of relationships and marriage, we face different challenges. Same sex marriage is now fully accepted alongside heterosexual marriage. Yet the church only offers marriage between a man and a woman. What can we do about this divide, this jarring discontinuity, and how can we reassure those with a same sex orientation that they are fully included and valued in the church?

It's a very difficult area for us. I'm aware there are a range of views in the church and this is something we need to work out together. But what I think is important is that the text "*It is not good for human beings to be alone*" has got to apply to everybody, and that those with a same sex orientation have just as much need for close relationships and intimacy as anybody else, and this is something we can't ignore.

I want to finish by focussing on what this text "*It is not good for human beings to be alone*" means for those of us who are single or widowed? Having not met Jane till I was 28 years old, I have some limited experience of the single life. To be widowed is in one sense very much harder, grieving for a partner who was so important to us but who is no longer with us, though many of us are at least fortunate to have children and grandchildren.

I don't have any easy answers, but I do believe this is where the gift of friendship and Christian fellowship are particularly important. We can cultivate the gift of friendship – it is not only something we need, but something we can offer to others. Jane and I have many friends who are single, and we value those friendships very much. In fact we find having those friendships enhances our relationship as well.

We can immerse ourselves in Christian fellowship. One of the strengths of St Peter's is, I think, the strength of our Christian fellowship and the many friendships within our congregation.

I would here put in a word for Home Groups. Home groups, where you stay in the same group and build long term relationships, can be a great place to share together, care for each other and understand each other more deeply. Do speak to me if you'd like to know more about our Home Groups at St Peter's.

In conclusion, relationships are fundamental for our human well-being, whether we find them in marriage and family, friendships or Christian fellowship – even our cats and dogs have a role! And relationships, friendship and fellowship are not only something we need but something we can offer to others.

Finally, our epistle today reminds us of our relationship with the risen Jesus – Jesus who was single himself, but who formed close relationships with the twelve, and especially with Peter, James and John. Our epistle reminds us that he is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters, and at the end of Mathew's Gospel he promises us *"I will be with you always."*