

# 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2025

## The paper-version Service



**To Begin:** Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's

Service.

**Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Hymn:**

Lord, for the years  
your love has kept and guided,  
urged and inspired us,  
cheered us on our way,  
sought us and saved us,  
pardoned and provided:  
Lord of the years,  
we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that word,  
the word of life which fires us,  
speaks to our hearts  
and sets our souls ablaze,  
teaches and trains,  
rebukes us and inspires us:  
Lord of the word,  
receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land  
in this our generation,  
spirits oppressed by  
pleasure, wealth and care:

for young and old,  
for commonwealth and nation,  
Lord of our land,  
be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, of our world  
where men disown and doubt you,  
loveless in strength,  
and comfortless in pain,  
hungry and helpless,  
lost indeed without you;  
Lord of the world,  
we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord, of ourselves,  
in living power remake us  
self on the cross  
and Christ upon the throne,  
past put behind us,  
for the future take us;  
Lord of our lives,  
to live for Christ alone.

## The Sermon by Rev Howard Wright

### Read Isaiah 62:1-5, Mark 10:1-16 – Being Welcoming

The Pharisees came to 'test' Jesus. It's a testing question, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?', not least because John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded because of his views on Herod Antipas's marriage to Herodias, his brother's former wife. So, if Jesus goes hardline he would be unpopular with the people and Herod! Or, as they most likely expected, if Jesus' answer is soft, they could discredit him. Jesus, who seem to flouted the traditions (the law additives – not the Law) surely would be 'soft' on this tradition too.

Jesus' answer was to clarify the question, They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' (Mark 10:2) But Jesus answers, 'What did Moses command you?' (Mark 10:3). And the Pharisees respond, 'he permitted'. This is a quote from Deuteronomy 24:1-24 and which is given in a very specific context.

In Jewish practice divorce was only available to husbands as women were men's legal property. (In Greek and Roman culture, the wife, assuming she had some personal income or status, could also initiate divorce.)

There were two competing Jewish schools of thought, or tradition regarding divorce. One tradition said, divorce could only be for sexual impurity – the part context of Moses' 'command'; the other tradition was much more lax, allowing divorce simply because the husband grew tired of his wife.

The Pharisees 'trick' question was about divorce, but Jesus responds in two surprising ways. Firstly, he challenges their and our motivation. This 'law' he says was because of your 'hard hearts'. To interpret this bluntly, he is saying, because you are selfish, and unwilling to love, to trust, to learn, or to change, the 'law' was necessary. There's a sense in which he's saying Moses' teaching permitted divorce, only because it's a better option than a marriage-less society with open adultery, or abuse. We'll return to this point of a soft heart at the end.

Secondly, Jesus answers not about divorce, but about marriage. He answers with the positive not the negative. He encourages us to aspire to the best and glorious vision of God, not to cower in fear of the consequences of failure and sin.

So, what can we see, what does inspire us in Jesus' teaching.

The woman is an equal partner – Jesus raises the value of women, they are not possessions but partners. The man 'forsakes' all else for the sake of his wife. The new partnership is an exclusive one, and though the man is highlighted, this applies to both, man and woman. The couple become one – though clearly different 'male' and 'female' they become united, not one lording it over the other, but of mutual benefit.

And, most importantly, because marriage is ordained by God, it's a holy thing. Time and again the Bible uses marriage as a metaphor of our communal and individual relationship with God. (For example, see Song of Songs, Isaiah 62, Ephesians 5, and Revelation 21.)

Marriage is a symbol, and example, of community – it's not good to be alone. Marriage should be the creation of a safe space for love, allowing the flourishing of creativity and joy. It is a place to be 'naked' without shame, or guilt, and therefore, a place to be completely unafraid, 'because fear has to do with judgment.' 1 John 4:18.

We know that marriages, all marriages, do fail to be entirely this safe place, but they remain a symbol or example of what can be. Marriage is a symbol of all that available for us know and forever in God. It's a foretaste of the joy and intimacy and safety that awaits us all. Now we see, but in a 'glass darkly', but one day we shall see face to face. Now we see in part and know in part, but one day we will fully know and be fully known and yet still completely loved. (See 1 Corinthians 13, especially verse 12). 'To know' can be synonymous with sex in the Bible. Our society pursues sex, the physical thrill of a moment, as an answer to our needs, but what we really 'need' is intimacy, is complete love.

Marriages are a symbol, and our earthly marriages are only temporary – it's only 'unto death do us part'. Many of us know how painful this fact is. But what God offers us is permanent, forever.

In the meanwhile Holy matrimony, marriage, enables communities to flourish and grow, not just for the couple, but the whole of humanity, children, unmarried, single, and widowed, and indeed the whole of creation. This was the creation plan, and remains the plan. However, right now we are failed humanity, with hardened hearts and so divorce becomes 'permitted'.

A very important side note! In this context, in the parallel Matthew passage, Jesus speaks of celibacy, which is a vocation as holy as marriage. Jesus was himself single and celibate. 24 million people married, but 30 million single in England and Wales! We fail each other and the whole of humanity if we don't also celebrate singleness – marriage is not the goal of life, relationship with Jesus is. And, we need to ensure that we include and welcome all people, Jesus did and does, and love and bless all, helping all encounter the love of God through our love and sharing of lives.

Finally, in this section of Mark children are mentioned a lot. (See, 9:17 – a child is healed; 9:36 – welcome children, welcome me; 9:42 – woe to those who cause a child to stumble.) In 10:13, our passage today, Jesus says to, such as, children belongs the Kingdom, and unless we receive the Kingdom like a child we will not enter it.

Children are naturally open, soft-hearted, curious, able to hear new things and trust. Children, in that day, had no rights except given by their parents, they had no power, but had to come in dependence upon God's grace to access the Father – there is no space for pride, or bargaining, they had nothing to offer, and neither do we! We too must come as helpless children, to receive God's blessing.

We are called to receive the Kingdom of God as little children – welcoming and receiving love, as we are welcomed and received, by the God who loves us. And we are with soft hearts to welcome others in, the married, our wives and husbands, the single, the children, and all with the same reception that we have received.

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany:** God our creator, who in the beginning commanded the light to shine out of darkness: we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, shine into the hearts of all your people, and reveal the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

**The Lord's Prayer:** *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.*

**Blessing** to be declared over yourselves, St Andrews and The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

### **At the Church of the Good Shepherd**

- Tea and Chat: February 19<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: February 19<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: February 26<sup>th</sup> at 10.30 in the Church Hall.
- The Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday in Church.

### **For Further information:**

This paper and all parish details are on the website at <https://www.parishofmedsteadandfourmarks.co.uk>