

## For a Little While

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22 (27) B, October 3, 2021

I have, over the course of my life and ministry, seen many marriages begin. I have also seen a good few marriages end. In each case, I try to remain hopeful that those who walk to the altar to become one have made the right choice. I also hope that those who walk away from the courtroom where one become again two have made the right choice as well. This passage from Mark is not of great help to me or to those who find, whether for reasons of abuse, growing apart, or any of a myriad of valid causes, that a marriage must end – or that it has ended, and all that’s left to do is admit it and help people move on. In marriages as in medicine, one seeks to preserve life, but not to prolong death. Our own tradition some eighty years ago itself admitted, as people faithful to a loving God, that leading people into relationships that hurt or stifle them, forcing them to remain in them, or cursing them when they choose to escape them, was as cruel as it was intolerable. Whatever Jesus is talking about in this passage, it cannot be that people should lead lives of quiet desperation, bound together past all love or hope or desire, or when one has good reason to fear the other and flee. That would vitiate his statement elsewhere that he came that we might have life, and to the full.

But it does raise the question of what he’s on about, and what exactly he means by the statement that we must “receive the kingdom of God as a little child” in order to enter into it. It’s not hard to imagine, once you start. Jesus by this point is a man in his prime, yet as far as we know, *pace* the plot of certain Dan Brown novels, unmarried and without issue. He and the woman he loved best outside of his family, Mary of Magdala, had remained to each other as teacher and disciple, and did not become man and wife. They could have. They may well have wanted to, but they did not. Yet I suspect they both must’ve wondered, perhaps fantasized, about what they were missing. They also did not become father and mother to the children each must’ve known they would have cherished and loved and enjoyed and raised well. What would they have been like, our

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little ones? I'm sure they wondered from time to time. Would we live to see their children, too? Yet, as T.S. Eliot says so wisely when contemplating a similar path he had not taken in his own youth, "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" ("Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*).

So, back to this rather stark passage on divorce. In Jesus's world, a woman who was 'put away', as the saying goes and the law allowed, had a status roughly equivalent to that of childless widows, sex workers, and the barren. A divorcée would have to find another man to protect her and provide for her if she could, whether or not she wanted one, or risk being on her own in a society that had little use, and much disdain, for independent women. Jesus seems not to have questioned this particular social norm, much as one might wish he had. He does, however, have a suitable contempt for those who would put a woman into such a condition, considering it selfish and wrong. He counsels against a man leaving the wife of his youth for the much younger trophy-wife of his wealth, for example, or one who would spurn a wife who stood up to him and expect him to change his ways, put the bottle down, get a real job and become the father, husband, and provider she needed him to be. He knew, as we all know, how hard it is to come between a fool and his folly – but would nonetheless do so, if he could. Thus we read the words that come down to us from his hearers, reminding them and us that in this, as in all things, the second great commandment has the governing word: "What is hateful to your neighbor, do not do." I cannot imagine him, or anyone else who had any sense, counseling a spouse to remain with a husband or wife whom they loathed, had outgrown, no longer knew or trusted, or who hurt them or made their life miserable.

That leaves us with the children, as he says, "Suffer the children" and all the rest. He may have had illusions about them as well, but what should we make of his command to be like them? Are we to receive the kingdom of God the way a child receives it – wide-eyed, innocent, a wee bit wary but ready to learn – or are we to receive the kingdom of God the way we are to receive children – as people in need of care,

protection, education, and civilization, and whom we love, if they are on occasion sniffly and a little bit sticky? The pull of the passage is toward the former, yet resonates with the latter; the path of wisdom suggests that we consider both. Receiving the kingdom of God, which Jesus elsewhere reminds us “dwells within you,” would thus mean receiving it in a manner open to all its hope and possibilities and opportunities for growth, as well as with such wisdom and skill as we can muster to live into them safely, neither romanticizing them or settling for the easy out of resting on the insight that, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

The reason is simple: it is not true. There is much that is new under the sun – new every morning, as that great John Keble hymn reminds us in its opening line. Each dawn is a new day, each of us is a new creation at our birth, and is made a new creation again upon our redemption, our opening ourselves to that life-to-the-full of which Jesus speaks, and in which he himself lives. We are among those things that are new, and are meant to live mindful of that newness, and of the time that is given to us to dwell in it, become who we are, and do what we are called to do.

“For a little while” this place is given to us, as it was given to our ancestors, whoever they might have been. We heard part of their story just a moment ago, in the powerful myth from Genesis 2. In that telling, the first person was alone – as alone as God the creator was. God saw that this was not good. This is first thing God made that God saw was not good and said was not good: that any of us should be alone on the earth, with no companion or partner or peer. Having called all the other animals by their true name, the first person went to sleep. In that sleep, and from that person, God made people as we know them: male and female, distinct yet complimentary, that none should ever be so alone again. Our understanding of gender, both its nature and the number of gender identities there are, has grown since the times of the ancients, but the point remains the same. A brief search brings up taxonomies in which the numbers of genders range from 4 to 11 to 32 to 76 – and where shall we find pronouns for them all? – meaning that all

we know for sure is that there are not just two, and not just one. Whatever we are, and how we get to be so, we were not born to live forever, and we were not born to live alone. “For a little while” we are given the lives we have and the places in which to live them, that we might flourish in them, be happy, and rejoice in all that life can be.

“For a little while” we did alright with that, but then marred it, to God’s horror and disdain. To deal with, after a long while and many false starts, God came down, in the person of God’s Son, to live among us, eat and drink with us, teach us and listen to us, to sanctify us and suffer death for us, so that we might not die forever, might never in that way become utterly alone. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the God who came down that way, the Son whom they saw in the flesh, had been there at the creation of all things, and was the instrument of that creation.

He became human, that Son, to live and die as one *of us*. What did he not become? What did he not come to live and die as? An angel, a power of God, distinct from God’s being but inseparable from God’s will. As a loving and wise Father, God did not want his Son to simply reflect his will, though he was the very imprint of his being, but be at one with him even in his distinctness, know the mind of God and yet know it distinctly from how the Father knew it, and know that he as Son was not the Father. The Son would know that mind not merely as the power to create but the power to know that one is creating. One knows that by feeling the power of that making move through one’s being as the musician does when making music with an instrument, or the writer does when making words sing with a pen. “For a little while” he lived, as we live, a little lower than the angels, who do not know pain, who do not know joy, and who do not know fear.

One of the most moving meditations on what it means to be made a little lower than the angels, and hence know joy and pain and powerlessness and fear, may be found in the work of the Welsh-English modernist writer David Jones. In his first and most famous work, *In Parenthesis*, he wrote of such a moment. Jones served in the British

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infantry during the Great War (WW1), in the trenches in France and Belgium. *In Parenthesis* is an epic poem about what he and his fellow soldiers endured. Jones survived, but millions of them didn't, including some who were standing right next to him when they were killed. As he was waiting to go "over the top" as part of an assault on the German trenches – an assault which he doubted he'd survive – Jones crouched down while the artillery shells whistled overhead. In the pauses between them, he could see what a beautiful morning it was, and hear the birds "chattering" above the trajectories of the shells, "counter the malice of the engines." His recollection of that moment brought to mind this passage from Hebrews. Here is what he wrote:

But he made them a little lower than the angels and their inventions according to right reason even if you don't approve the end to which they proceed; so there was rectitude even in this, which the mind perceived at this moment of weakest flesh and all the world shrunken to a point of fear that has affinity, I suppose, to that state of deprivation predicate of souls forfeit of their final end, who nevertheless know a good thing when they see it.<sup>1</sup>

With death all around him, with death most likely before him, and considering himself in rather the condition of the damned, Jones turned his mind to the skill of the weaponers, even if he did not approve of the weapons. He turned his mind also to the incongruous beauty of the day in a land made green "to remind you of South English places," and to the power of life in the birds to thrive on that day and the next, and to survive all this. He knew a good thing when he saw it, and could not not-see it. Something about that choice, that decision to see the beauty flying over the horror, the irony outlasting the tragedy, shows us at our human worst and best at once. It shows our freedom, our grace, our fragility, our mortality, and our ability not to despair, even when surrounded by the weaponry and war that signals nothing but despair, and with good reason.

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<sup>1</sup> David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 [1937]), 154.

At least, for a little while, which is all the while we have. In the time given to him Jones asked, as the writer of Hebrews asked, and as the psalmist asked, “What are we that you are mindful of us, Lord?” and “What am I...?”

Well, we are at first children, increasingly self-aware, self-critical, and if we mature rightly, self-affirming where we need to be, and self-denying where we need to be. We learn where we are weak, and where we are strong. We learn that we are, as Blaise Pascal wrote in *Pensées*, “...a reed...but a thinking reed”.<sup>2</sup> It may take, as he says, but a vapor, a drop of water – a mortar shell, or a wee little virus – to kill us, but we know it, and have glory in that knowledge, if not power. In that glory we have what even the angels do not have: wonder. Curiosity. The desire to make things of ourselves that are not ourselves. We desire to master the things that are in order to make them better, if we can, and ourselves better, if we can, and to remove what causes misery and pain, suffering and death, even, though the wonder of it is that we make even at the grave our song, “Alleluia.” We can, and therefore should, praise God and what God has made as we do this, or as Frank Herbert has his finest characters do in his novel *Dune*, “Praise the Maker and his water. Praise his coming and his going. May his passage cleanse the world.”

We are the creatures that can do that or not, sing in wonder, love, and praise at once. More importantly, we are creatures who can do that freely, and can want to. On this day when we will bless the animals in our lives, along with our creator and the power of creation, let us remember that, if but for a little while, we have this power. We can do it, and that because we can do it, we should, and because we should do it, we must. *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Vide, inter alia*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/394587-man-is-only-a-reed-the-weakest-in-nature-but>.  
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