

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All week Simon Perfect has been beaming. From the moment he saw the readings appointed for today he's been calling and whatsapping me. 'Are you preaching?' 'Good luck!'. I didn't have the heart to tell him I've not written his final year report yet. [Good luck].

Today's readings are hard. If our first reading wasn't difficult enough... the choice of Job as the one to be tested strikes at our natural sense of justice. Job's own words strike us as misogynistic "You speak as any foolish woman would speak" and yet we then immediately read "in all this Job did not sin with his lips". Our gospel reading takes our discomfort further. Jesus condemns divorce and then tells us that "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery".

Scripture challenges us. When we find ourselves smoothing or rushing over this or that passage we are in danger of ignoring or mishearing how God is speaking to us through Scripture.

And yet if we do sit with difficult or hard passages of Scripture, we all too often treat them at face value, or worse reduce Scripture to a rule book when it's supposed to communicate to us the very Word of Life.

Whenever we read Scripture, whether it's an easy passage, a passage that we love and comforts us, or it's a hard passage that challenges and disturbs us, we need to let Scripture be Scripture, we need to read Scripture as Scripture and not like another kind of text: a rule book, or a book of fairy tales.

Whenever we read Scripture, we open ourselves to be comforted as well as being challenged, to be consoled as well as being disturbed. It's sometimes said that art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable, and we can find the same with Scripture.

Then as we read the text, and we notice our reaction, we bring as much to the text as we take from it. We bring our own histories, our concerns and worries, and the stories of ourselves, our pains and hopes and loves. And we bring all the ways we've been taught what we think the Bible says, or have been told the Church teaches. And sometimes the ways we think or fear what the Church teaches can disrupt God's communication of God's self through the text, can blind us to Christ's presence with us as we read Scripture.

We can see this in our Gospel reading today. We hear Jesus' condemnation of divorce. It's difficult not to react to this text. It can make us aware of our own pain in relationship, our sense of regret at relationships past, or fears and difficulties in relationships present. It calls to mind the turbulence and turmoil of friends or family members or ourselves who have gone through the pain of divorce or the greater pain of persisting in a relationship that is not contributing to our flourishing. It might confirm our belief or even our fear that marriage is life long, and divorce ruled out. We bring to the text a history of understanding this is what the Church, and by extension, God has always willed.

But this is only the first stage of reading a Biblical text. We notice all of these reactions and we offer them back to the text of Scripture again. We look again to see afresh how God is communicating to us in our reading. What bits of the passage are silenced in our first reading? What verses does this underplay or overlook? Is this all that God is saying to us here? What other history of interpretation does the text have?

What God has joined together, let no one separate. The theme of divorce is introduced by the pharisees, a trap designed to test Jesus. Jesus meanwhile focusses our attention on God. God's action in creation. God's action in calling two people together in marriage.

What God has joined together. A question not so much of divorce but discernment, of the importance of paying attention to what God is up to in our lives. Is God really calling me, us to this or to that? Are we swept along in feeling or convention or are we really paying attention to the call of God in our lives?

Finally, notice how the passage ends. People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

However we read this text, if we read it simply as our condemnation of divorce our reading can't stop there because our text of Scripture does not stop there. If it does we become like the disciples blocking the way of those who would meet or take others to meet Jesus. Our difficult passage is immediately followed by Jesus's command to let the children come to him, do not stop them. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

As anyone who spends any time with little children knows they have an amazing capacity to welcome, to see past the tribes and the labels we give ourselves and others, to greet people as they are and not who they fear might be or have been.

Children teach us an immense capacity to see the person in front of us as they really are and as God sees them and not as we or others label them: a success or a failure, as someone to be pitied or to be feared.

This passage ends with a command to greet people as little children greet others, to meet people as Jesus meets them because when we do so with greet them as Jesus greets us, we meet God as God meets us in this text and in all the texts of Scripture, and to open ourselves not to condemnation or judgement or this or that particular rule but to the transformational encounter with God that comes through reading Scripture as we are ever more refocussed on God's action in the world, on precisely what God is calling us to do, on who God is calling us to be as we meet Christ and spend time in God's presence.

And then we find who ever we are, and however we have been, as we read the text of Scripture, Jesus meets us, blesses us and sends us out who ever we are and what ever our story, and calls us to do the same.