

For me, the best line in any comedy film is that spoken by Kenneth Williams in Carry On Cleo in which he plays Julius Caesar.

When he realises it's The Ides of March, and that he's going to be done in, he rushes into shot and shouts: "Infamy! Infamy! They've all got infamy!"

Just how I felt when, a few weeks ago, I had the text from Ephesians to preach about where Paul seems to be saying - until you delve into what he's actually saying - that wives should be obedient to their husbands.

Last week it was the Gospel where it might appear that Jesus is telling us to cut bits of ourselves if we want to enter the Kingdom of God.

This week I have Mark's account of Jesus' teaching on marriage, and divorce. So I do indeed feel like Kenneth Williams: "Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it infamy!"

In today's Church, any member of the Clergy who reads this Gospel out-loud is likely to be called cruel, unfeeling, unforgiving, unloving, out of touch, and a lot of other less complimentary names.

Many, many people today are bruised by the whole trauma of marriage breakdown.

So much so that I'd be surprised if anyone here today doesn't have some experience of it in their family - I know I have in mine.

To raise the topic, let alone talk about it in a sermon, might seem to many people unfeeling; even "Un-Christian."

Nevertheless, it's something that needs to be talked about, and shouldn't just be swept under the Church carpet.

Maybe if I was I was looking at it through the lens of a tabloid journalist it might seem that the Church takes the line: "It's no sin unless you enjoy it."

Whilst the world says: "Do what you like as long as it feels OK for you."

I know that's a stereotypical simplification of this whole complex matter, which might tempt us to leave well alone, and indeed sweep it under the Church carpet.

Nevertheless, we're all members of the Church, the Body of Christ, not just passive spectators.

For that reason we have a responsibility to reflect in prayer, and with our minds, on the Christian understanding of human relationships.

I'd like to do that by looking at what today's Old Testament Scripture, and the Gospel, have to say about the relationship between men and women.

Like the two final brush strokes in a work of art the Lord God created men and women to come together in a communion of love.

A communion of love where they're equal and complementary.

Partners and companions, not dominator and dominated.

Out of all Creation only woman was the God-given other half of man; and that truth's expressed in Genesis where it says: "For this reason a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." Gen. 2: 24

The Catholic Church has upheld this primary truth right down the centuries; that men and women belong together in a life-long commitment of love.

This commitment should be a mirror that the world can look into to see how God loves us, and which reflects out to the world the three-fold communion of love within God - Father, Son, and Spirit.

True, also, that down the centuries there have been times when the Church displayed a rather negative attitude towards sex.

Typified perhaps by these words from an early Christian theologian, Origen:

“If it had not been for the Fall, [of humankind] the human race would likely have propagated in some mysterious or angelic manner without sex, and therefore sin.”

But for a long time secular culture also had a negative attitude as well.

As a reaction to that, in the 1960's, along with “Beatlemania” and other cultural revolutions, we had a sexual revolution; the consequences of which are still reverberating today.

Particularly the fashion where living together as a trial-run before marriage has become the habit and the norm - I believe a great deal of it has to do with peer-pressure too.

And it doesn't do any good for Christians to bemoan this as a sign of falling standards of morality, and to say: “Isn't it dreadful, it wasn't like that in my day.”

But we do need to say clearly that living together isn't the same as being married, because it's always at the back of your mind that you can get out if it doesn't work out between you.

When a man and a woman stand together before the Lord, and make their Marriage vows, it's for life.

That's the difference between living together, and the Sacrament of Marriage.

And because the Church takes that line, lots of people think it's a kill-joy, and doesn't think of marriage and sexuality in a positive and life-enhancing way.

But it does; if people took the time and effort to see what it actually says about it.

As C.S. Lewis pointed out: "Pleasure is God's idea, not the Devil's." But he doesn't mean we can do what we like.

If you want a child to develop and grow into a good and loving person you set them limits and point them towards things that'll nurture them, because you love them.

And that's why the Lord sets us limits, and tells us what's good for us; what will make us grow more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

People say that it's very difficult to be faithful in marriage today.

But speaking from the experience of being married for 36 years, I don't think it's any more or less difficult than it was for my Parents or Grand-Parents.

Human nature's fallen away from the grace of God, in consequence of which we're weak and sinful people who constantly need to root ourselves into the grace and mercy of the Lord to stay true and constant to each other.

Even so, there are times when marriages fail.

That's when the Church needs more than ever to tangibly express the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ to those who're going through the trauma of marriage break-up.

A time when Christians must be compassionate, and loving as He whom we follow as our Saviour always was to people going through the storms of life.

A time to help people to pick up the pieces of their lives, whilst at the same time staying true to our Christian calling.

A time not to be self-righteous, judgemental, and hypocritical.

When a marriage falls apart there's a deep, deep loneliness in people's hearts; an ache, which only Jesus can heal.

In these situations His Church should be the place where people can find the grace and compassion they need.

Because: "If people cannot find these things in the [family of the] Church we have no business to go on using that expression."

John Stott: Issues Facing Christians (1984) p. 321

In the last part of today's Gospel: "Some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them.

But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him." Mk. 10: 13

And Jesus is angry with the Disciples for their hardness of heart towards these children who needed Him most.

"[So] he hugged [the children], laid his hands on their heads and blessed them." Mk. 10: 16

When marriages do break up those involved are like these children who need a special hug from Jesus.

May we Christians never be like the Disciples, and turn away, and turn away from, those who are in need of the Lord's love and grace at this traumatic time in their lives.