Our Lord was compassionate to that erring Samaritan woman, who did not remain with one husband, but committed sexual immorality by contracting many marriages. (St Irenaeus *Against Heresies* III:17:2…183 AD)

October 6th **The Shofar** Marriage is sacred

Marriage and the design of God

The overall theme of this section of Mark's Gospel reading extends beyond the marriage context. Jesus opposes the concept of kicking someone out of your life just like throwing away trash, as Moses permitted men to do to their wives. We live in a throwaway culture. We use things and dispose of them when they are no longer useful to us. But when we do this to the people in our lives, we disrespect that person's dignity. Respect for the dignity of the human person is at core of all Christian teaching. Anything that does not do that is not Christ-like. Ultimately, applying the throwaway mentality to human relationships, is contrary to the ways of God. In both our personal and collective lives, we must learn to deal with people constructively rather than throw them out of our lives. It means accepting the faults of others and forgiving them. It means reflecting to others the unconditional love that Jesus showed us. For the church, it means a church of inclusion that cares for her flock with mercy.

In this context, churches are called upon to ensure positive steps are taken to improve the integrity of marriage, to be sources of support , encouragement and healing rather than creating an environment where people feel they are somehow beyond the love of God, that they are not welcomed as a part of the Body of Christ gathering for worship and mission. Nowhere does Jesus say that anyone should be excluded or feel excluded from a community or from dining at table with one's fellow Christians if one divorces and remarries. That concept is not found anywhere in the New Testament.

Marginalising people is a purely human response and not God's law. What churches should do instead, is offer marriage and family discernment programs, help people to make wise choices about whether or not to be married, and how to choose the right partner. And churches should offer marriage counselling by qualified people to help keep marriages together if reasonably possible. In other words, help, do not punish. Be inclusive. Make people feel good, not bad. Love is always more potent than fear in getting things done and in the end, it is the Kingdom way.

Another look at divorce

Divorce is the death of a marriage, producing both loss and grief. Undoubtedly, the oft quoted Biblical text appears to use strong language when discussing it: **Malachi 2:16 in the NIV Bible reads**: *The man who hates and divorces his wife,' says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'does violence to the one he should protect,' says Almighty God. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.* A perhaps more familiar translation uses the phrase "*God hates divorce"*, and for many faith communities it is this latter translation that has guided much of the discussion over divorce and marriage.

This strong language used in Malachi illustrates how the marriage covenant is not something to be taken lightly, either in biblical times or today. The NIV Study Bible notes on the phrase above *The man who hates* - "The clause is difficult and may be understood in reference to God as the one who hates divorce (e.g., 'I (God) hate divorce' in other translations like NRSV or NASB). Regardless of the squabbles over translating the Hebrew, the overall context is clear. What God hates is the breaking of the covenant (cf.Hosea 9:15…*Every evil of theirs began at Gilgal; there I came to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more; all their officials are rebels*.

In the Hebrew scriptures divorce is a social crime as it breaks the marital covenant and takes protection away from the woman who was afforded it legally in the marriage. Divorce not only puts the one being divorced in a difficult position, but it also causes much suffering for all involved, including the children in the family.

The ESV Study Bible also notes that this is one of the most difficult Old Testament passages to translate. To assist readers, it provides a footnote for verse 16: *who hates and divorces*

probably meaning Yahweh*, the God of Israel, says that he hates divorce, and him who covers.* This translation and those like it teach that God hates divorce putting the focus of the passage on God's hatred of the practice of divorce rather than on the hatred of the man doing the divorcing (and it was the man who divorced the wife).

Whichever way the verse is translated (God's hatred toward the practice, or the hatred of the man committing divorce), God is opposed to this type of divorce (faithless husbands sending away their wives) in Malachi 2:13-15. Malachi is clear that marriage is indeed a covenant derived from the creation account. Marriage involves an oath taken before God, therefore, when it is broken it is broken before God.

What Does the Bible Say About Marriage?

From the very beginning, marriage is depicted as a vital part of God's creation. In Genesis, we see that God created man and woman and declared*, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him* (**Genesis 2:18**). This indicates that companionship and support are central to the purpose of marriage. It's a partnership designed to mirror the unity and love found within the Divine Trinity.

Marriage is also about procreation, providing a stable and loving environment for raising children. This is reflected in the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). As well, moving beyond companionship and procreation, marriage serves as a reflection of Christ's relationship with the Church. **Ephesians 5:25-27** teaches us that husbands should love their wives *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*, highlighting the sacrificial love that should characterize marital relationships.

Understanding our roles within marriage is crucial for harmony. The Bible provides divine guidance on these roles, emphasizing mutual respect and love. Husbands are called to lead their families with love and humility. Ephesians 5:25 *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* That is a high bar but crucial to Christian marriage. This kind of leadership is not about dominance but about sacrificial love and care.

Wive are encouraged to respect and support their husbands. St Paul says, *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.* This submission is not about inferiority but about a willing collaboration in the marital relationship, fostering mutual respect and unity.

Sadly, there will always be divorce

Living together as humans, we are inevitably going to face conflicts and make mistakes. The Bible recognizes this and places a strong emphasis on forgiveness**. Colossians 3:13** advises us to *bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you*. In marriage, this principle is vital. We must be ready to forgive our spouse's mistakes and seek reconciliation.

The teachings of Jesus also stress the importance of forgiveness. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We sin. We fall short and miss the mark but God does not desire us to be wallowing in darkness with no way out of even self-imposed misery. In **Matthew 6:14-15,** He insists: *if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you*. *But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.* Forgiveness is not just a nice-to-have but essential for a thriving, healthy marriage that will be a living out of the divine plan.

Forgiveness must be the key response of the Church and Christians towards those who find their marriage ending in divorce. While we cannot make right what God has said is sinful, judging and the casting out of sinners is not a ministry that comes with baptism.

Respect for the dignity of the human person and an unconditional love is at core of all Christian teaching. Anything that does not do that is not Christ-like. Ultimately, applying the contemporary throwaway mentality to human relationships, is unacceptable. In both our personal and collective lives, we must learn to deal with people constructively rather than push them to the margins. It means accepting the faults of others and forgiving them. It means reflecting to others the unconditional love Jesus showed us. Divorce will sometimes be necessary and while that does not mean it is the will of God, it can be something God understands as he embraces the divorcees in mercy.