

Jesus meets the disciples part

[Matthew 19:10-12]

Jesus is often seen as serious about everything, no laughing, no banter. But this was not I believe the case. If we look at this short story from the perspective of Jesus engaging his disciples in discussion it shows Jesus as laughing and joking with them. Unfortunately the story, like so many other stories, has become the hunting ground for theology and Jesus the person and the disciples as people have been ignored.

The story starts with Jesus coming to Judea from Galilee. There the Pharisees raised a legal issue with him: "Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" I want to jump over the argument with the Pharisees to move on to the discussion between Jesus and his disciples, but the final statement made by Jesus to the Pharisees is important as an introduction.

Jesus concluded with his own legal judgement: "anyone who divorces his wife when she has not committed adultery and marries someone else commits adultery." This sparks off the disciples' response: "If this is the situation regarding a man and his wife, it's best not to marry." They are shaken. The prevailing attitude among men was that they could divorce an unsatisfactory wife and find another! This was what the law permitted.

In England divorce has to be approved by a court. Throughout the twentieth century the grounds of divorce have become more and more trivial, but the court still has to give formal consent. This was not the case among the people of Israel, nor is it the case traditionally among Muslims in the Middle East. All a man had to do was to decide to divorce his wife. Then under Jewish law he had to issue a writ of divorce. As most people were illiterate this would generally be written by a scribe using the prescribed formula and certified by witnesses. The only penalty imposed on the man was that he may have to pay the wife a sum of money. However this sum was not very high. [see the notes].

So there were really no legal controls on men's behaviour. If they found a more attractive, perhaps younger, woman they could divorce the first wife and marry her. The only resistance would come from the second woman's father who might not agree to the marriage, because he might fear that the husband with the roving eyes might at some future stage move on to yet another woman!

However the disciples are stunned at Jesus's defence of wives. No divorce in order to marry another woman is permitted unless the wife has committed adultery. This was a total upset of men's treasured marriage rights. Their response is immediate: "If this is the case it is better not to marry at all!" This almost certainly reflects the way in which most men of Jesus' day would have reacted. One can imagine the disciples gasping in horror and shock and looking round at each other with astonishment! Their response was certainly very spontaneous, open and frank; from the heart. Here indeed was teaching with a different ethical content.

Jesus takes up their suggestion that it is better not to marry. Men who have reacted in alarm to the idea that their sexual impulses might be so severely controlled are unlikely to be good candidates for abstention from marriage! So Jesus says: "Not everyone can accept that idea (of abstention from marriage). That is only for those for whom fate has decreed it."

He then goes on to remind them that there are three types of eunuchs. There are those who have been born eunuchs. There are those who have been castrated by men. There are those who have castrated themselves for religious reasons.

The first type are well known to the medical profession. The cause can be some genetic defect or some form of biochemical defect. While the causes were of course not known

in Jesus' day the effect was well known and is mentioned in the Mishnah. This states that a man who has not shown the signs of puberty by the age of twenty is to be considered a eunuch.

The second type are well known historically. Men were castrated for use in harems in the Middle East from early times. This type of eunuch is also mentioned in the Mishnah. The church, particularly in Italy, castrated boys to enable them to sing in church choirs without their voices breaking until it was banned by Pope Leo in 1878.

The third type is also well documented around the time of Jesus. Josephus, the Jewish historian, states in his book *The Antiquities of the Jews*, (Chapter 8, Section 40): "Let those who have castrated themselves be detested. Avoid any contact with those who have deprived themselves of their manhood and of children who God has given for the increase of the species."

So Jesus was not inventing the legal concepts of "eunuchs who were born eunuchs" and "eunuchs who have been castrated by men" and "those who have castrated themselves". He was using the terms current among his own community. Their meanings were well known and physical. They were not psychological.

Modern translations, such as the New English Bible, which translates "eunuch" as "incapable of marriage", need to be treated with caution. I assume that translation was used as a euphemism because the blunt "eunuch" would appear tasteless to some "refined" modern minds. However Jesus used no euphemism. He used the words "eunuch" and "castration". He lived in a more down-to-earth, frank community in which people spoke more openly about such matters than they do in Western societies today, and furthermore the practice of castration was still relatively common and familiar, though Josephus recorded that (for Jews) it was unlawful to castrate men or animals. (Same reference). The passages in the Mishnah show that there were legal consequences for a person who was a eunuch and these are set out in detail. They were undoubtedly taught in the synagogues. Eunuchs may not have been numerous but for legalists like the Rabbis even the rarest situation had to be covered. Indeed one's reputation would be made by thinking up situations and rules to meet them which others had not dreamed of!

Then Jesus concludes: "However if you can (abstain from marriage) get on with it!" I don't think he expected many takers and I can imagine the disciples laughing and realising how ridiculous the idea was in practice. If their wives were present I can imagine them laughing heartily!

Jesus of course did abstain.

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

Verse 7: The rule about issuing a writ of divorce was laid down in Deuteronomy 24:1. Details of how this was implemented are recorded in the Mishnah, *Gittin* (Danby pages 307 - 321). It was important for the divorcee to have a written notice as only then would she be able to marry someone else.

When a Jew married the normal procedure was to write a marriage contract, called in Hebrew the "ketubah". This would of course state the names of the husband and wife, but it would also state the bride price (also called in Hebrew the "ketubah"). The bride price was the amount of money the husband would owe the wife. It could be paid at any time during the marriage but any outstanding amount would have to be paid either when the husband died or when the husband divorced his wife. The Mishnah sets the standard bride price for a virgin at 200 denars, perhaps a hundred pounds or so of today's money. However the amount was not fixed. Any amount could be agreed to in the marriage contract. See the Mishnah, *Ketubah* (Danby pages 245 - 264)

The parallel in Islamic law is also interesting. The bride price is divided into two parts in the marriage contract. The down-payment is stated and is payable at the sitting when the contract is drawn up and signed. The deferred payment is also stated and is payable to the wife either from the husband's estate when he dies or payable by the husband if he divorces his wife. I have seen contracts in which the down-payment is very small, a few pounds, but the deferred payment is very high, thousands of pounds. This discourages the husband from divorcing his wife!

Verse 12: The objection is raised that Jesus says: "Those who have castrated themselves for the kingdom of heaven" and surely the kingdom of heaven is a Christian concept? Firstly note that the verb is past tense. Jesus is referring to a known fact at the time he is speaking, so it is not future and Christian. People had already done it. Secondly the Kingdom of Heaven / Kingdom of God was a well-known Jewish concept which Jesus adopted, modified and used for his own teaching. It was not a new idea. Perhaps in Christianity we could almost translate it as "the sphere of the spirit" except when it refers to the literal concept of some Jews who were expecting a physical reign of the Messiah on earth.

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