

Homily given by Reverend Roger White on 7 October 2018
Job 1.1, 2.1-10, Psalm 26, Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

Beginning this morning and continuing through to the end of November, the second readings that we will be hearing will be from the Letter to the Hebrews. We do not know who the author of this letter is, and although it has been attributed to St Paul, from the very beginning most people have doubted that he in fact wrote it. Some think that the thing is a treatise in the form of a letter, and if this is the case then it is the longest sustained theological argument in either the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures; others think that the Letter to the Hebrews is a sermon, and if so, even by the standards of the 16th and 17th centuries it is a very, very long sermon.

It is, however, an important document. It is an attempt by the anonymous writer to assert Jesus's superiority to angels, to the Hebrew prophets, to Moses, and to the priests of the Temple cult, to assert the superiority of Jesus's sacrifice of himself on the cross to the sacrifices that the Jewish priests offered with animals and grain in the Temple. The author seeks to tell us who Jesus is, what he does, and why all of this is important; and in the bits from Chapters 1 and 2 that we hear in this morning we hear the author describe Jesus as the 'pioneer' of our salvation, made perfect through 'sufferings'. 'Pioneer' -- the *archegos*-- the leader, the captain, the one whom to follow, in this case towards 'perfection', which does not mean 'flawlessness' but rather, fullness, maturity. And the *archegos* will lead us to maturity through 'suffering', *pathema*, struggle. We have the invitation to follow the one who struggled mightily in this world against much of what this world does --the one who, if we imitate him, will lead us to maturity through struggles with the *kosmos*, the world, the 'system' that we have come to inhabit.

And all of this may help us to understand that extraordinarily vexatious passage from Mark's Gospel that we have just heard, the so-called 'hard words on divorce'.

We need to understand the context of this exchange. As so often they do, the Pharisees are seeking to 'test' Jesus, to trip him up into antagonizing someone. For, in fact there was a debate among the rabbis as to whether a man should be allowed to hand his wife a certificate of divorce that would probably render her penniless, vulnerable, and without protection in that society: they want Jesus to mis-step, to take side which the other side can condemn. And the word that Mark uses for 'test' here is the same word that he uses for 'tempt' when Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The Pharisees have assumed the role of Satan in this story.

As usual, Jesus avoids the trap by asking the Pharisees to tell him what Moses in the Law has said, and they need to reply that Moses gives a man permission to dismiss his wife with a certificate of divorce, which is when Jesus comes back at them and says that it is only because of human failures, the hardness of human hearts, that Moses permits this and that it is not part of the world that God made in the Creation.

Jesus says this is part of how the *kosmos*, the 'system', the world of the Temple cult operates as they cite Deuteronomy, and so he goes further back in Torah, the Law, to the Book of Genesis and the Creation story and says that what God intended was that human beings should live in relationships that are about becoming one with one another, that are about ... love. And when he sees his disciples pushing the children away from him, he tells them No, you need to go back to the beginning to what you first were, to what we and the *kosmos* first were, and try again, think again.

Jesus' sufferings, his struggles, and the ones through which he us to lead us are with the *kosmos* that human beings have improvised out of the world that God created and that needs to become different, to become more like what God intended in the first place. When he says that those who divorce and remarry are adulterous, he is not describing a new and different law code but rather a different *kosmos*, a different system entirely than that which God created and which is not about generosity, kindness, grace, and love but is rather the harsh system of the Temple cult.

And so the invitation that we have on this morning is not to fall into the trap laid by the Pharisees and stumble into their *kosmos*, become part of their system. Rather, we have the invitation to remember what

God intended the world to be and to struggle amidst the world that human beings have improvised to live with generosity, kindness, and ... love so that more and more the world around each of us comes more and more to resemble what it needs to be. Amen.