

SUNDAY 26C All Saints

'Church history is complicated' I often have to say when trying to explain where the Anglican Church comes from. This is perhaps fresh in people's minds with the Queen's recent Anglican funeral. The story usually goes that Lecherous King Henry 8th wanted to divorce one of his playgirls in order to start an affair with a new one. The Pope said no way. So Henry formed his own church with rules allowing divorce.

This is of course a common, oversimplified argument against Anglicanism. But far from the post-Reformation Church of England being historically lax on divorce and remarriage, it in fact held among the strictest rules on this.

This week, background to the news of Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, encourages a re-look at the oversimplification of Church History to the point of saying the opposite of what actually happened.

Queen Elizabeth II would never have been Queen but for the impossibility of marriage after divorce in the Church of England. Elizabeth's father, King George 6th, only ascended the throne after his elder brother, King Edward 8th, abdicated to marry divorcee, Wallis Simpson. Marriage after divorce was opposed by the Church of England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, was vocal in insisting that Edward must go.

After Elizabeth became Queen, her sister, Princess Margaret, hoped to marry a divorcee, Peter Townsend. As Margaret was under 25, she needed the Queen's consent, consent Elizabeth could not grant as Supreme Governor of the Church of England which did not allow for marriage after divorce.

Similarly, Prince Charles and Camilla could not be married in the Church of England as Camilla was a divorcee.

Far from the Church of England being historically lax on divorce and remarriage, it held among the

strictest rules on this. Like Roman Catholicism, it held to complex regulations on annulments (ruling that a marriage was not valid). The Church of England's annulling a marriage was never as lavishly applied as in Roman Catholicism. [Two of Henry 8th six marriages were annulled – he never actually got divorced. You can remember that next time someone asks you about the founding of the Anglican Church.

Of course, all this reveals is that Church history can be a tough read at times. All the divisions and wars. The same thing happens with nations as we are reminded daily with the war in Ukraine. It happens with races of people, in happens in the church, it happens between religions.

I suppose we find it difficult to understand when religions cause separation between people. Religion is a word which means “to bind together”. Re-ligio. As in our English word ligament. Ligaments bind the bones and joints together. Religion is really about binding people together. People with each other and people with God.

It's very easy for religious groups to separate themselves from others, in spite of the meaning of the word. Religious groups sometimes believe they have the truth about God and about life all neatly sown up in their own system of thought. So they have to believe that everyone else is wrong. At that point they become separatist groups. The only people who can be members are those who conform to their beliefs.

While separating ourselves off from others occurs in many ways and for many reasons, it can have some very unpleasant consequences. It is the consequences of separation which forms the basis of today's gospel.

The rich man separated himself off from the poor man. He used his wealth to isolate himself from the world around him. He was secure, he had a place to live, enough to eat, plenty of clothes. Why worry about anyone else. The rich man was a separatist, and separation has its own consequences.

When we read this parable, it is important to concentrate on the separation that occurs. The rich man separated himself from the needs of those around him. He separated himself from his religion. He didn't listen to what the Law and the Prophets told him he should do. He separated himself from God. He separated himself from his family. The other details of the story are there to add colour and reality to the tale. The details come from a later age and a different outlook.

It is not true that the rich will automatically become poor or the poor rich. The rich are not all deserving of hell nor are the poor deserving of heaven. It is possible for the rich to use their wealth wisely. It is possible for the poor to reject God. What seems to occur over and over again in this parable is the way the rich man separated himself from everyone else.

In Jesus day it was widely believed that if a person was blessed with this worlds goods then this was a sign of their good relationship with God.

Conversely, the poor were believed to be so because they had sinned. The same thought is still around, and I believe we must fight against it whenever possible. What we call the "Protestant work ethic" reflects this belief. The Protestant work ethic could be looked at as the idea that hard work will be rewarded by God with material benefits. It is not necessarily so that a person with a good supply of worldly goods is in a right relationship with God. This is the point Jesus makes in the parable.

Money, worldly goods, possessions, do not establish a relationship with God. Poverty doesn't establish a relationship with God either. There is no virtue in being poor. Poverty was something Jesus continually sought to alleviate. It seems that even miracles do not establish a relationship with God. Even if someone should rise from the dead they will not believe.

What becomes clear in this parable is that we are asked not to allow anything to separate us from God and from one another.

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We may be tempted to believe that because we are not rich, then this parable has no message for us. But there are other riches besides money. There are the riches of affection. We can become so engrossed in the love of our own home and family that we forget those who are lonely or left out of such pleasure. There are the riches of intellect. Some are gifted through reading, through conversation and culture and can easily look with contempt on those who do not have this ability. There are the riches of faith. We who belong to a faith community need always to be aware of the benefits we receive from the church. Are we willing to share those benefits with those who do not have them?

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Today's Gospel invites us to look at our own riches and to see how we use them. Are they separating us from others or are they bringing us into contact with others. Do our riches separate us from God, or do they bring us closer to God?

Yes, most often times we fail, relationships get broken. We may be separated from one another. We know that in Christ we can seek forgiveness and begin again to build better relationships with God and others to the glory of God.