

# DIVORCE

a challenge to the Church

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# INTRODUCTION

The origins of this book lie in the fact that, while coming to terms with my own divorce, I have been met with kindness and confusion in equal measures. People have wanted to help but have been unsure how they might do so. I have written one chapter in direct response to this, entitled ‘Dos and Don’ts’. This chapter gives some practical pastoral tips and insights for anyone needing to offer support to someone being divorced. The book provides an extended theological reflection on the reality of divorce and it also makes the case for the church to offer people a specially tailored service that would acknowledge the end of their marriage within a liturgical setting. Other than this, the book furnishes a collective consciousness for people who have been or are being divorced—akin to a ‘divorced worldview’.

## MY STORY AND I

I have kept a fairly comprehensive journal during my recovery period and I use my personal record of feelings and experiences to guide and sometimes to illustrate the material that follows. This is not always directly acknowledged or apparent but, on occasions, I have found it easiest to make my point by quoting directly from the journal. I made the following entry after a grim New Year’s Eve:

My first crisis moment catches me by surprise. It comes unplanned, unexpected and unwelcome. It is New Year’s Eve and I am standing on my own, with a pint of beer in my hand, in a city geared for celebration. I had been planning to spend the night with friends. They were planning a dinner party to see in the New Year. It would have been civilized and

it would have been fun. However, the hostess rang this morning to say that her husband had been ill during the night and they would need to cancel.

I am determined not to feel sorry for myself so I go for a walk, and so it is that, at 9pm, with the city switching into party gear, I am outside and on my own. The urge to turn and run for home is overwhelming. I can switch on the TV and feel safe. I can watch a film. I can drink; I can smoke; I can do anything except think. I can block out the reality of my situation. I can go to sleep and wake up the next day. There will be no loss of face because no one will ever know that I have been on my own for the evening.

It is then that obstinacy kicks in. I decide to stay where I am. I feel that I have as much right to be outside as any of the happy, smiling couples or the boisterous, extraverted groups of laughing teenagers. I try to convince myself that no one is going to judge me or feel sorry for me because I am standing on my own. They do not know what I am doing and, as far as they are concerned, I might be waiting for someone. I feel lonely, self-conscious and insecure. It is a blisteringly unhappy moment. Strangely, though, I like the fact that, unhappy moment as it is, it is at least *my* unhappy moment. I feel comforted by that thought. In the middle of my feeling grubby, lonely and sad, I feel the glimmerings of a sense of self-respect: I have not scuttled home, turned on the television and tried to block out the reality of what is happening.

It is a dull and unexceptional type of suffering. There is nothing brave about feeling terrified at the prospect of an evening ahead on my own. However, what is significant is that it is the first occasion, since the breakdown of the marriage, when the immediate moment has become more compelling than my endlessly obsessing about all that has happened previously. When the marriage began to unravel, I was completely preoccupied with trying to work out what Sarah wanted and what I should do in response.

As it happens, my nervous sense of social exposure does not last for very long because, after an hour or so, I bump into friends. We spend the rest of the evening together and I return to my house at 1am.

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It was not the loudest, wildest, most fun evening of my life, but it was *my* not-so-loud, not-so-fun and not-so-wild evening. I have had the tiniest pinprick of a glimpse of what it means to be able to think for myself—and having done it once, I feel confident that I will be able to do it again.

Using my own story in this way is an important element in making sense of the situation: ‘we are our stories’.<sup>1</sup> It lends a sense of context, honesty and authenticity to what would otherwise be a generalized set of conclusions. There is more immediacy to stories that draw from actual events and concrete situations (‘What was I doing when...?’) rather than hypothetical ones (‘What would I do if...?’). In particular, my experience challenges the assumption that divorce, while being a regular occurrence, is still a distant phenomenon, particularly among those in my situation as a church leader.

Stories are the quickest and easiest way of giving you the information you need about everything that happened to me and how I dealt with it all—while leaving you, as the reader, free to form your own conclusions. Stories are tentative and hesitate to draw too bold a set of assertions: they allow you to pre-judge my situation. Pre-judging is different from prejudice. Prejudice is blind and bigoted: it means that someone has decided on an opinion and refuses to budge. Pre-judgment is natural and instinctive: it means that someone has formed an opinion but is happy to see it revised.

‘How can I give an opinion when I do not have all the facts?’ my father would ask of me, with the forensic precision typical of a lawyer of his calibre. I would reply that even if he had all the facts I would still need his opinion because I would want to know how to connect all the facts together. My stories give you the gaps between the different facts and help you to imagine yourself into my situation.

‘Judge a person by his shoes,’ my grandmother always told me. It is the glimpse of other people’s lives that helps us to shape the instinctive pre-judgment we make of any situation. You as the reader

need my stories not so that you can sit in judgment on Sarah and me but so that you can shape your pre-judgments, which will in turn shape the ultimate conclusions you draw from the book.

### A SURVIVOR

The etymology of the word ‘survivor’ is to ‘live above’. This offers a more dynamic sense to the word than the dull idea of survival as nothing more than continuing to exist and clinging on. Divorce, remarriage and children born out of wedlock have become so well established in British life that special greeting cards are designed to celebrate the complex relationships that typify 21st-century families: ‘To Mummy and Daddy on your wedding day’; ‘Happy Christmas to Mum and boyfriend’. As well as ‘egreetings’, there are ‘dgreetings’ that one partner in a divorce can send to the other: ‘My heart mourns at the fact that the spark of love that ignited passion in our soul can’t be rekindled again’ ([www.dgreetings.com](http://www.dgreetings.com)). In addition, the Yorkshire Building Society offers a ‘Fresh Start’ mortgage tailored to people coming out of a messy break-up or divorce. All these are expressions of the ability of human beings to ‘live above’ their situation and move forward in it.

My experiences are unique and specific to me; at the same time, they are illustrative of the experience of the divorced ten per cent of the UK population. Every experience of the end of a relationship is distinctive, different and ‘other’; however, a broken heart is a broken heart whatever the circumstances behind it. I hope, therefore, that this book will be relevant to anyone going through the experience and in whatever way—whether as the one leaving or the one left. The person who ends the relationship may feel an immediate relief but a subsequent guilt. By contrast, the person who is left may feel immediate grief but then less guilt. There are themes that are common to all—vulnerability, social isolation and the consequent spiritual and emotional exposure, which put people in need of

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protection and direction from the church. An extract from my journal illustrates these themes:

I am living on the edge of other people's rituals—children's christenings, weddings, birthdays, even funerals. I stand and I watch, I listen and I talk. I ask questions and I make comments. I am serious, solemn or jocular according to what the other person is saying. Listening is all I can do because, at the moment, I have got nothing to say. People talk to me because they can see that I want to listen.

I ask couples about where they first met. It is a good question for me to ask because they will take a while to reply. The longer they talk, the less I need to talk, and at the moment that suits me fine. Couples with tired marriages, who have been together for ten and twenty years, tell me with a twinkle in their eyes about how they first met. Older people introduce me to their younger, cheeky selves; younger people give me a glimpse of the sombre, solemn, hopeful person lying within.

I talk about them because I am happy not to talk about myself. I am able to see and understand more about people's lives precisely because I am lying outside their regular, structured narrative of events. I am 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3) because I have nothing that I want to add to the conversation. The less that I bring of myself, the more I seem to appreciate what others tell of themselves. I am the man with no name, the man without a story because, as my hopes for the future are disintegrating, my understanding of the past evaporates.

Despite these common emotions, I am not suggesting that my experiences should provide a standard template for how to deal with divorce. The other side of the coin, as I have mentioned, is the unique and distinctive nature of each person's situation. This needs careful handling on my part and discerning reading on yours. I am in a good position to write this book because I have my own set of experiences to draw from, but I do not want to use the fact that I have been divorced as an emotional trump card to claim legitimacy for what I have to say; the ending of a marriage is not a triumphant

story. My stories provide authenticity rather than authority to my treatment of the subject—a way of considering the wider context of the debate.

I feel a fierce loyalty to those people described elsewhere in the book as the ‘society of the dispossessed’. They have had their marriage snatched away and should not now have their individual story removed by the colonizing words of someone such as myself who has chosen to go to print. There is a blurred line between the author’s ‘could be’ and the reader’s interpretation as ‘should be’. My way of coping with divorce may not be theirs. This book is not a recovery manual but one person’s fumbling attempts to draw away from the collapse of their marriage.

We all have our own way of dealing with things, and the subconscious does its own work, as the following extract from my journal demonstrates:

I had a dream about Sarah. She had died and I was griefstruck—there were things that had not been said and I felt that I needed to be there with her family. Concerned Christians who thought that I should not go were smothering me. They took me on a bus but it was going in the wrong direction. I ran to get on a bus that was travelling back in the direction I had just come from. Once on the bus, I recognized Sarah’s brother Peter. Sitting crosslegged on the dashboard was Sarah’s mother, going through all the arrangements that needed to be done. They were pleased to see me because Sarah had left in her will that I should be included in the service and they did not know how they were going to manage that.

My way of coping is to write, read, run or watch films. I always run an identical route at a set and regular pace, with the very same music playing each time, and there is a point in the route where the rhythm of the music, my steps as I run and the beat of my heart are perfectly synchronized. These are welcome points of momentary anaesthesia, which help to start the process of building blocks of

new experience as a counterweight to my divorce. I watch bland ‘chewing-gum’ television programmes with whipped-up plots and improbable characters. I read trashy, repetitive books (thrillers with clumsy storylines and predictable outcomes)—anything not to have to think. In the first instance, I want to shut my mind to the full reality of the situation.

Inevitably, this emotional prevarication is more about postponement than about moving on with a finishing process. Looking at what has happened through filtered lenses is an early stage in the grieving process. In time I will work through the Kübler-Ross five stages of grief. ‘Denial’ will eventually lead into ‘anger’, ‘bargaining’, ‘depression’ and finally ‘acceptance’.<sup>2</sup> People can help me but no one can hurry the process. The grieving process is akin to Godard’s celebrated dictum about a film—that it must have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.<sup>3</sup>

I find that I am for ever stumbling over people’s assumption that I should be talking about my feelings as a way of coming to terms with the situation. However, talking simply makes me feel that I am reliving everything that has happened, and I end up feeling doubly traumatized by it all. I am not trying to draw all-purpose principles from this tight, ‘male’ coping strategy, but it suits me in the early stages of my recovery process.

The Bible has a tradition of giving honour and respect to outsiders, people who don’t fit. The Psalms talk of God’s special care for widows, aliens (strangers) and orphans (see 68:5; 146:9), and a modern version of this list might include divorced people. This scriptural respect is not a consolation prize for those of us who seem to have missed out on everything else. It is a description of how things actually are: I am blessed through what has happened because, although misery is a hard taskmaster, it offers clarity and insight and understanding. Now that I feel truly unhappy, I have no space to defend. Divorce has given me a set of insights and learning about life that I would never otherwise have had. I can already see glimpses of things that I might have to offer other people as a result.

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The fact that I am suffering means that I am able to offer reassurance to others; it is the oppressed who make the first move, the afflicted person who offers comfort and sustenance. These are hard-won insights.

### A SENSE OF IMMEDIACY

Although the events I refer to in this book are now some years past, the sense of immediacy that I want to convey is emphasized by my use of the historic present and the first person ‘I’ rather than the third person ‘he’ throughout. My ex-wife, as you will have noticed, is referred to throughout as Sarah (which is a pseudonym). Divorce is a jarring, disabling experience, and I want to reflect some of this jitteriness back to you by presenting events as if they were happening now.

I have talked with a number of people about their particular experiences of divorce. Their comments are included in the book, along with my own experiences, as illustrative material. There is a part-anonymity offered to these people: their comments are not always individually identified and are sometimes included as part of a composite picture.

Drawing from other people’s stories as well as my own allows a voice to the diversity and the fragmented nature of divorce. The fact that my story is different from another person’s can be a strength rather than a weakness. Storytelling is more collage than photograph: it avoids a single generalized framework of interpretation and allows expression to the voices of different people. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*, ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’<sup>4</sup> For example, Sarah and I never had children. Part of my recovery has come because I have been able to cut contact with her, and I would not have had this choice if we had had children together. This means that I can give limited attention to the effect that divorce might have on children. Annie,

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who contributed to the ‘Dos and Don’ts’ chapter, writes as a mother with children, while the chapter on ‘The family’ draws on material looking at the effect divorce can have on children.

The following are examples of things that people have told me about their experience of divorce.

- Each day was a hard fight against sliding downhill into self-pity and depression.
- Some people just become drained of life: I also just couldn’t go out because I didn’t have the energy. I could just about go to work, but that was it. It was so surprising, because I was still quite young—I was only 35 and I’d had tons of energy before.
- Once the initial intensity of grief has subsided and the reality of the situation has sunk in, then divorce is about coping from day to day, week to week, year to year. That coping may take various forms. Very often it means immersing oneself in work or family.
- To begin with, in England, I just worked. I was working seven-day weeks—80 hours a week. I just worked—that’s what I did.
- How I describe it is, it’s like, every morning you get up, you put the 60lb pack on, you climb up the mountain, you climb back down again, and then the next day you’ve gotta do it again... and again... and again. And all that you’re conscious of is that you’ve got to keep doing it, and it’s hard graft.

There is a hard emotional slog needed to get through the experience of divorce. Other comments made to me are about how children provide a focus of attention. Concentrating on their immediate needs is a way of negotiating the transitions needing to be faced.

- Nevertheless, children provide a spur and an incentive to carry on when there is little other inducement. When there are children to be fed and watered, the show must go on.
- With children, you’ve got to go on. They don’t give you any option. You plough on.

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- But however much I didn't feel like going on, I knew I had to go on because these three guys [the children] were depending on me.

The strongest picture, however, is simply of people who were unhappy.

- I moved through a number of phases—at first, griefstricken, initially for the loss of the girl I loved as much for the loss of the marriage. I remember talking to my sister on the phone, and saying, 'Why? Why? Why?'
- The pavements between here and the Co-op are marked with my unhappiness and anger and bitterness and upset.

When there are children in the marriage, this adds another layer of distress and tragedy. Those who are parents typically describe the breaking up of the family as the most painful part.

- Wherever I went, the world seemed to be full of families, out together, just being together, bickering, teasing, joking, dads taking their weekend turn with the pushchair, doing everyday stuff. It drove a dagger into my heart. We would never, never be a family like that again. What have I done to my child, that she would never know this everyday security? What careless choices of mine have denied her this?
- I grieved for the loss of my family. I had my family, my wife and my children... and that was shattered. I was very fortunate in that I was kept so busy. I felt suicidal—but didn't get close to actually planning it.

## THE CASE FOR A LITURGY OF TRANSITION

There are a lot of divorced people sitting in church pews and, in cases like mine, even preaching from behind church lecterns. The

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question I am asking is how the church might best be able to provide a consistent, well-informed and pastorally sensitive response to those of us who have been divorced. There are two central thoughts in this book. The first is that the idea of being in exile can be used as a metaphor for divorce; the second is that the church should be offering to people who have been divorced some structured opportunity for regret, remorse and repentance for the past, along with forgiveness, hope and promise for the future. This could be done either through specially tailored prayers or through a liturgical service of healing for those whose marriage is ending or has ended.

My argument is that a service of closure would not legitimate divorce. It is possible for the church to be accepting of those who are dealing with the consequences while still being clear about the inherent wrongness of divorce. My suggestion is that a liturgy of transition could become one among a range of options offered by the church. The prayers at the end of this book are an example of something of this type. The prayers, written through the Methodist Church, are appropriate either to a divorce or to the ending of a love affair.

The Anglican Churches in Canada and Australia have produced a liturgical service to mark the end of a marriage, but an attempt to do something similar by the United Reformed Church (URC) in England in 1993 was met with a degree of hostility and criticism. Among the wider church leadership, this opposition may have stemmed from unwillingness to be publicly associated with an issue that would offend religious sensibilities. Among divorced lay people, it may have been linked with a lack of ownership of the issue, due to feelings of shame<sup>5</sup> and a desire to distance themselves from the experience. (I look in detail elsewhere in the book at the idea of shame and divorce: shamed people are less likely to want to bring attention on themselves.)

Other reasons for this hostility towards the idea of a liturgy of transition may have emerged from a misconception of the role of

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Christian theology in public life. Public theology is not simply a set of propositions saying that something is either right or wrong; it is a way of interpreting the world in the light of a belief in God. A liturgy of transition neither exonerates nor condemns what has happened; it offers me a way of making sense of and coming to terms with what is happening. I can't undivorce myself, so what I need from theology is not simply an application of biblical truths to my life but an integration between my Christian faith and the reality of my situation. It is not inconsistent for the church to recognize both that divorce is wrong and that dealing with divorce is unavoidable.

Nevertheless, there has been a significant shift in the way the church relates to people who have been divorced. The Church of England General Synod recognized that while “marriage should always be undertaken as a solemn, public and life-long covenant between a man and a woman”; there are circumstances in which a divorced person may be married in church during the lifetime of a former spouse’.<sup>6</sup>

The logic that allows a second wedding service for some people who have been divorced should also allow a liturgy of transition for those either unwilling or unable to remarry. At the moment, ritual acknowledgment of the end of a marriage comes only with the arrangements for a second marriage. There is no liturgical service offering any form of closure to the divorced person who is either unable or not intending to marry again and instead wants to live a celibate, single life after the ending of their marriage.

Some people are not given the gift of marriage: they live challenging, sometimes difficult and often fulfilled lives as single people. Some people are given the gift of marriage and they cultivate it and watch it grow. Others, such as myself, are given the gift of marriage and squander it. The question in this book is how the church can reflect God's compassion and forgiveness, yet stand firm on the sanctity of marriage and the vows of lifelong commitment. What is the best way for the church to acknowledge my situation as

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a divorced person without appearing to condone the end of my marriage? Beck-Gernsheim says that the normalization of fragility is what lies ahead for the family; she describes it as a tacit normalization of divorce.<sup>7</sup> How can the church acknowledge the pastoral needs of those within this situation while also interpreting and challenging the social trends that created those needs?

A part of the answer to this question will come through unblocking people's nervousness when asked to care pastorally for someone going through a divorce. It is a big jump to go from knowing someone as part of a married couple to relating to them as a divorced, single person. I am looking to the church for comfort and support but often find myself frozen solid in a pastoral no-man's land. People who have been friends to Sarah and me as a couple are struggling to learn how to relate to us as individuals. They have had to reposition themselves in our lives just as we have had to in each other's life. Some people don't know whether to support us or challenge us. Some, who want to remain friends to both of us, get drawn in and suffer as collateral damage. Divorce not only breaks the bedrock teaching of the church about the family, but it also undercuts the organization of churches around the ideal of a happy and united family.

I hope that my use of exile as a metaphor for divorce will prevent you, the reader, from simply feeling sorry for me as someone who has been divorced. I have no desire for divorced people to be treated as a new oppressed minority within the church, added to the list of people feeling marginalized or hard done by. I do not want to 'champion the cause' of the divorced. In almost any subset within the church—singles, teens, older people, homosexuals, childless couples or clergy—there will be some who feel that the church is not geared to them and their particular needs. This book is not trying to make any kind of rallying call on behalf of any one of these groups. Happily married couples with children can just as easily feel taken for granted as single people in a church programme where too many of the jobs are done by too few of the people. The reality of

church life is that the consumers outnumber the producers.

I do not intend this book to be seen as undercutting the centrality of marriage within the Christian tradition. The damaging effects of divorce and the value of a stable marriage are self-evident. At the same time, I do not want the church to make a scapegoat of divorced people to reinforce the importance of marriage. Thatcher warns against a teaching on marriage (and families) that derives entirely from a prior concern to defend nuclear families.<sup>8</sup> All societies tend to exclude various groups of people, making them victims, so that those who are on the 'inside' have something by which to measure their own sense of success and self-worth.

A liturgy of transition would sit in an institutional blind spot for the church: an organization that gears its strategy towards avoiding divorce does not easily form a response should that situation arise. As I have already stated, however, doctrinal correctness over the centrality of marriage need not be compromised by a finely tuned pastoral response to those whose marriage has ended. Christians are called to be people of grace *and* truth. If I am offered too much grace and acceptance, then forgiveness becomes condoning, emotion becomes sentimentality and my divorce is seen as being unfortunate rather than wrong. If I am offered too much truth, judgment becomes condemnation and the possibility of redemption is squeezed out of the whole process. I don't want other people to pretend that everything is all right; equally, I don't want to be made to feel worse than I already do.

The law has ended my marriage but now I need the church to help me to finish it. The distinction between 'ending' and 'finishing' can be illustrated by reference to a dinner party. People might arrive for the meal at 8pm and leave at 10.30. The dinner ends when the last guest leaves, but it will not have properly finished until I have cleared the table and washed up. Practical, pragmatic law courts are the only social narrative of explanation for the end of a marriage; but it was in church that my marriage began and it is through the church that any finishing must come. Divorce is distinctive because

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once it has happened it can't be undone simply through regret and repentance. Finishing will come when I have been able to work through all the implications and fallout from my divorce.

Jesus' teaching about the danger of leaving a house empty (Luke 11:24–26) can refer to the danger of leaving a difficult situation in limbo. A vacuum never remains as such but will be filled with competing forces so that the person ends up worse off than they were before. A liturgy of transition will not plug the emotional gaps, nor will it mend the sacramental shredding wrought by divorce. What it will do is to offer a holding station where divorced people can seek the protective and healing cover of the church. It is more akin to a Noah's ark (in other words, a transitional place) than to a temple (that is, a permanent home). When Joshua crossed the River Jordan into the promised land, he set down twelve stones to mark the transition from the old to the new (Joshua 4:19–24), and this signified both a completion and a new beginning. I would like a similar transition marker for my own life.

A liturgy of transition *per se* could be just as pertinent to any change in a situation that defines a person's own sense of identity. Negative experiences such as divorce, unemployment or a miscarriage—as well as positive experiences such as the birth of a child or moving house—can all have the same effect of dislocation and loss of identity. In the UK, theology does not yet see itself on the same shelf as the self-help books written to offer top tips on life-changing situations, but there is no reason why the church, as a body of believers, should not draw on the treasury of its accumulated wisdom and offer insights to those people who might be glad for a sense of direction and don't want to wait until Sunday to receive it. A liturgy of transition would also offer an opportunity for the church, as an institution, to reconnect with citizens in their day-to-day living and re-establish trust among people who would otherwise be feeling disenfranchised.

EXILE

This book constructs a theological framework round the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC and the Israelites' subsequent exile in Babylon. Divorce and exile are mapped on to each other in three different ways. The fall of Jerusalem is used as a parallel to the collapse of my marriage, the period in exile is used as a parallel to the period of readjustment after my divorce, and the eventual return to Jerusalem is used to parallel a final process of recovery. The question of how to sing in a strange and difficult land (Psalm 137:4) is adopted as a guiding question to the process of seeking healing and recovery.

The idea of exile can be used as a metaphor not only for divorce but also for Christian living more generally, and can be understood positively as well as negatively. Exile is a hopeful image of growth and potential as well as a negative image involving ideas of distance, alienation and separation, being away from home, excluded and unable to return. When the Israelites were exiled from Jerusalem, they were in both a religious and a geographical wilderness, and they found that this wilderness was not simply a transitory state that finished once they returned home. After they returned to Jerusalem, it was the wilderness and the lessons they learnt while in exile, rather than the temple and their previous religious practice, that shaped how they understood God.

I draw from the work of Walter Brueggeman and track the same questions asked of the exiled Israelites by the psalmist. What is the significance of their previous life in Jerusalem? How do their memories of Jerusalem shape the understanding they have of themselves and what role do these memories play in their new life in Babylon? The answer is that their Jerusalem memories remind the Israelites that although they have become a part of Babylonian culture, they do not belong there because they have a distinctive identity as the people of God. They are not simply a vanquished and scattered diaspora, and this means that remembering their past is key to retaining their identity as the people of God. If they forget

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Jerusalem, then they will become absorbed into the Babylonian culture. If they cling to memories of Jerusalem, however, then they will be unable to engage with the Babylonian culture and get on with their lives. They will be unable to do what the prophet Jeremiah asks of them, which is to live out the reality of their new situation and seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God has taken them into exile (Jeremiah 29:7).

Using my own experience of divorce, I cast myself as the person in exile. I ask the same question of my situation that the Israelites asked of theirs. What is the significance of my past life as a married man? How do my memories of marriage and divorce shape the understanding I have of myself, and what role do these memories play in my new life? The answer is that allowing myself to live with both the grief that is now, and the happiness that was in my now-ended marriage, offers me my only opportunity for integrity and wholeness. If I try to deny what my marriage meant to me, I become a half-person, shutting my mind to what has happened in the past. I end up either apathetic or hedonistic, because all I have to live in is the immediate and present moment. If I try to hide myself in nostalgia for the past, however, again I shrivel, shutting my mind both to what is happening now and to what might happen in the future. I become either bitter (if I blame my ex-wife) or melancholic (if I blame myself).

My dilemma is similar to the one faced by the Israelites. This book adopts the idea of the Israelites learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land as a paradigm both for the Christian's involvement in contemporary society and for the divorced person's recovery from the breakdown of their marriage. The writer of Psalm 137 asks how this can be done, as both a therapeutic and a theological question. First, it is therapeutic because the psalmist is distraught. There is a brutal passage within the psalm, singing to God for deliverance but also longing for the violent deaths of his enemies' children (v. 9). Verses of expectation, longing and love hold within them the apparently opposite sentiments of hate, revenge and bloody-mindedness. The

two emotions are not mutually exclusive. Second, the question is theological because the Israelites no longer have access to the temple in Jerusalem and have to learn new ways of worshipping Yahweh. In the same way, in my situation I need both therapy and theology. I have to deal with my anger as well as reshape my understanding of what faith in God will mean to me now that I am divorced and in exile.

The power of the image of the Israelites sitting by the rivers in Babylon is in the strange, eerie sadness, where melancholic feelings of loss and longing run in parallel with violent and angry reactions towards those who are causing the pain. This melancholy allied to the untrammelled violence in the language provides a perfect reflection of myself. At the same time, it cradles my imagination and demands an alternative world of hope and possibility because, in his grief, the psalmist recognizes that, just as things have changed once, they will need to change again. Christianity is not about forgetting but about remembering well. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that nothing bad has happened. It means acknowledging, understanding and then forgiving. This is a work of grace that keeps me from being trapped by what has happened. Part of the curious nature of redemption is that it is when people are at their lowest ebb that they receive promises, energy and empowerment from God.

The point of remembering well is not to convince myself that the world is a safe place and I have nothing to fear but to prepare myself to live again in a frightening world that has hurt me badly. Remembering well makes me realize that, since things have collapsed once, they could all too easily collapse again. If my life can be changed as completely as it has over the last few years, what is to say that it might not happen again? It is this realization that teaches me to care passionately and fight tenaciously for my future; grief expresses itself through hope.

TO CONCLUDE

Divorce has taken my spiritual and emotional virginity. Before the fall broke the covenant between God and humankind, ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ were the same thing, but now, after the fall, they are separate. Before my divorce I was ‘naked but not ashamed’ (Genesis 2:25): ‘naked’ not in the sense that I was perfect but that I had nothing to be ashamed of. I was imperfect but free from fear of disapproval. Now that my divorce has broken my marriage covenant, I am still ‘naked’ but now I want to hide. I ruminate on all sorts of lurid narratives to try to put what has happened into context. I feel like the elder brother in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 15:25–28), who stands to one side while his younger brother is welcomed home. I imagine the story of someone who has been a drug dealer, shot someone, then been converted and become a Christian. He could be speaking at a Christian conference within six months, telling people the story of how Christ saved him. My situation is that I had been going to church for ten years and then got divorced—I simply end up feeling ashamed.

There is a thin dividing line between too much and too little information about myself: stories of how much I am struggling to get my life back on track might be interesting but not always informative. If the focus of this book falls more on me and my feelings than on divorce and its social implications, then the book will end up as a deliberate, self-conscious pathology, an extended example of ‘woundology’, described by Myss as the sharing of wounds, the new language of intimacy, a short cut to developing trust and understanding.<sup>9</sup> There are two traps in ‘woundology’, both of which I want to avoid. The first trap is to substitute feeling for understanding. This book has been written to give you a vicarious insight into the experience of being divorced, and this is a task of the mind as well as the heart. The second trap is definition by default. ‘Woundology’ would mean defining myself by what has gone wrong, and all you would be given is the chance to learn what

a terrible time I have been having. My challenge is to allow myself to be defined by Christ's redemption rather than by the misery of all that has happened.

Everyone likes a happy story. There is a standard 'rom-com' film narrative about what happens when relationships break up: things are difficult for a period but come right in the end when the hero(ine) falls in love again and lives happily ever after. If I tell my story with a simple, two-dimensional 'Then I was sad but now I am happy' twist, then I can leave you, as the reader, feeling excluded in one of two ways. If you are struggling in your own life, you might feel alienated by a book with too strong a 'happy ever after' storyline. If you are happy, and interested only to find out more about divorce, you might feel excluded from a storyline that speaks too strongly of difficult situations producing illuminating insights. I have read some books that have left me feeling disempowered because of the implicit suggestion that the worse the experience, the more we learn about how to appreciate life—as if we need to have experienced Sarajevo in the middle of the civil war in order to have a rounded view of life.

The idea that divorce is my crucifixion and a future happiness will be my resurrection is theologically glib because it sees crucifixion and resurrection as being entirely sequential (one coming after the other) rather than simultaneous (one blending into the other). Before his crucifixion, Jesus made explicit references to the kingdom of God as having already arrived (Mark 1:15) and yet being still on its way (9:1). The kingdom of God is not a process that waits until Jesus has been crucified before it kicks in. After Jesus' resurrection, Paul and the apostles saw the crucifixion as the core part of the message they had to offer (1 Corinthians 1:23). For the apostles, crucifixion was not something that they left behind as they moved on. It became an integral part of who they were together.

A book that conformed too closely to this stylized 'happy ever after' social narrative would be read as a morality tale describing how things should have been as much as how things actually were.

## Introduction

Trying to parcel divorce entirely within such standardized categories of interpretation is reminiscent of Canute trying to hold back the waves with his hands. It ignores the jerky, disjointed and destructive nature of the experience. It is reversion therapy—a ‘back to the basics’ family message. It also ignores the fact that the prevalence of divorce is reshaping our understanding of family life. I look elsewhere at how the shape of a family can no longer be taken for granted, and cannot even necessarily be measured against the benchmark of a two-parent nuclear family. Some aspects of divorce are not simply evidence of the breakdown of society but can also be seen as part of a process of society renewing and transforming itself.