

LENT 5 – YEAR C (2019)

Picture the scene: Jesus is sitting in the Temple in Jerusalem, teaching those who came to hear him. Suddenly there's a noise in the distance: men shouting, a woman screaming. The noise gets louder, and several men can be seen dragging a half-naked woman into view; the crowd of listeners parts, and the woman is dumped in front of Jesus, as the men who dragged her into his presence look on. They, Scribes and Pharisees, look at the woman with fascinated revulsion, righteously indignant that they have found the ultimate test for Jesus' theological soundness; and she, the pawn in their little game, bare, battered, bruised and bleeding, looks at the ground, totally humiliated and utterly ashamed. Not a pleasant image is it? I'm sure all of us would convince ourselves that, had we have been there, we would have been appalled; we would have walked away, perhaps even intervened – or would we? Perhaps, like the Scribes and Pharisees, we too would have waited to hear Jesus' response to their very clever and tricky question; perhaps, like them, we would have looked at the woman with the same fascinated revulsion that sexual sin always seems to conjure in the human mind.

So we could view this scene from the point of view of any of the characters involved in it: Jesus, the woman, her accusers or the bystanders in the Temple; but, though each perspective would undoubtedly give us a unique lens through which to view the situation,

the question for all remains the same: what is Jesus going to do about this woman whose fate is in his hands? How can he not condemn her without condemning himself?

This whole story is actually about three encounters: the challenge of the Scribes and Pharisees to Jesus; the reversal of that challenge by Jesus to them; and the encounter of the woman with Jesus alone. And notice it is only in this final encounter that the woman becomes an active participant in the story: before she has been used by the Scribes and Pharisees as a chattel – she means nothing to them, nor does her injured husband; she is merely incidental in their conflict with Jesus, as they seek to pit her predicament against his understanding of the Jewish Law. One of the things that is so harrowing about this story is the way in which this woman is turned from being a human person into being a thing, an instrument with which to provoke a debate about the Law. And it is only at the end, when Jesus stands alone with the woman, that he draws her into active participation: before he offers forgiveness and new life, he offers her a voice, encouraging that communication which is at the heart of what it means to be human.

Jesus' primary concern in this story is with the woman: he is not interested in a debate on the Law; he's not interested in the Scribes' and Pharisees' questions – we know this because he doesn't engage with them, but rather bends down and writes on the ground; he physically

turns his back on them and their questions, and doodles in the dust. We can never know what he wrote, but we do know that this action was a sign that Jesus was not only indifferent to questioning and undoubtedly disappointed by the situation, but that he was also resolute that he would not be drawn into a debate on sexual morality. His only concern was for the woman, whom the Scribes and Pharisees had objectified and de-humanized: Jesus' objective was to make her a real person again, by restoring her dignity, and offering her mercy, forgiveness and life.

And in order to do this, Jesus must first deal with the Scribes and Pharisees, not by engaging in a debate, but by reversing their challenge, and making them the subjects of condemnation, as they had sought to do to the woman. His challenge – for the one who is without sin to cast the first stone at the woman – can only have been understood by the Scribes and Pharisees to be a challenge on the same level as their own: a challenge that the one without sexual sin may cast the first stone. Jesus turns the tables and makes the accusers the accused: and, finding themselves as subject to judgment as they had made the woman, they slink out of the scene one by one, beginning with the eldest who, perhaps through the wisdom of years or the burden of sin, recognised that Jesus' challenge condemned them all. So Jesus is finally left alone with the woman, to do what no other can: to grant her forgiveness, to

make her human again, and to offer her the newness of life that can only come from a right relationship with God. As S. Augustine puts it: 'Only two remain, the wretched woman and the incarnation of mercy'.

There is something about this story that touches us all: all of us, I'm sure, are touched with pity for the woman caught in adultery; all of us moved to tears at the gracious mercy and forgiveness shown by Jesus. But we are touched, too, like the Scribes and Pharisees by a fascination about sexual sin; and by a propensity to objectify other human beings, to de-humanize others by making them objects, pawns in the great game of life, to be used or abused as we wish. One of the most miraculous things about this Gospel story is that it doesn't belong in S. John's Gospel at all: it wasn't written by the author of the fourth Gospel, but it was included at what was thought to be the most suitable point, simply because the early Christian Church thought it so important that it just had to be there somewhere. Because it spoke to them, and it speaks to us, not only about Jesus' mercy and forgiveness, and the literally life-giving power it had in the life of that woman; but also of a deeper human truth, that there is not one of us without sin, and that, judged by our own imperfect standards, prejudices and hypocrisies, there is not one of us who, in the sight of Jesus, the Incarnation of Mercy, does not stand condemned.

We live in a hyper-sexualized world: everything seems to be about sex – kiss and tell stories in the papers, graphic reports of rape and child abuse, political campaigns fought on the basis of sexuality and gender issues, and the voice of the Church on such issues, which seems to the wider world always to be negative, backward and eager to condemn. And I wonder if, by God's grace, this story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery has something to say to that debate today: notice that Jesus does not condemn the woman, but he does acknowledge that she has sinned, that she is in need of forgiveness, repentance and a new way of life. As with all other sins, sexual sins de-humanize us, they mar God's image in us and make us less that we are called to be: but they're no more destructive than the sins of hypocrisy, prejudice, and the insidious desire and propensity to see people as objects rather than as human beings, created in the image and likeness of God. We human beings, and especially we Christians, get ourselves so wrapped up about issues of human sexuality that we fail to see that our judgments themselves are the sins, and that, judged by our own standards, we too stand condemned. There is an element of that fascinated revulsion about things sexual in us all, but there is a deeper, more destructive malaise in our hearts, and that is our readiness to judge and condemn, to de-humanize and stigmatize, without first learning to listen, and to walk around in someone else's shoes for a while. Jesus had no interest in

being drawn into a debate about sexual morality: his only concern was to forgive, show mercy, heal and give life. What Jesus saw in that woman was a real human person, not a problem or a distraction from mission.

Like the woman caught in adultery, each one of us stands before Jesus, and, though clothed, as naked as she was to his piercing and loving gaze: nothing about us is hidden from Jesus, in spite of what we so often think we can hide. And, as with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus wants only to forgive us, to offer us his mercy and make us fully human again. We are, in this season of Lent, on a journey and in a process of being made more fully human: of recognising our need of forgiveness, and our consequent need to repent, so that we may be restored to a right relationship with one another and with God. And it's not just in Lent that this process needs to happen: it's necessary every single day of our lives, for each day we stray from Jesus and need to return to him.

So often we beat ourselves up about things that we think are the most destructive sins in our lives, and yet we fail to see that it is more often our attitudes and prejudices that are far more harmful to ourselves, to others and to our relationship with God. This morning's story of the woman caught in adultery is a great leveler, because it shows us the universal nature of sin, the universal need for repentance, and the universal offer of forgiveness and mercy by a God who, in Jesus Christ,

doesn't fob us off or pretend that our sins don't matter, but who takes us and our sins so seriously that he offers his own life so that we might be freed from the power of sin and inherit eternal life.

We cannot imagine the shame of that woman as she stood half-naked before Jesus, nor can we imagine the delight, gratitude and love that must have filled her heart when he saved her from certain death, and gave her back what is most precious to us all – her humanity. May we learn from his example: may we become 'incarnations of mercy' to those around us; may we be swifter to judge ourselves than others, looking always to understand rather than to condemn. May we use the power that is in our hearts and hands to offer forgiveness, mercy and life to others; and may we use our God-given humanity to restore the gift of humanity in others, especially where it is denied, objectified and abused by reason of our sin, prejudice and fear. This is the work of God, this is the work of grace, this is the true work of the Christian Church: to live, work and walk with real human beings in the messiness and reality of human life, and to bring to the lives of all a glimpse of the pardoning, healing, life-giving mercy of Jesus, who says to us and to all, 'I do not condemn you: I love you, I forgive you, I give you back your humanity, and a future filled with hope. Judge not, that you be not judged yourself; forgive and you shall be forgiven. Go, and sin no more.' Amen.