

WHEN MISERY MEETS MERCY

Isaiah 58. 1-12

2 Corinthians 5. 20b-6.10

John 8. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our text from St John's gospel is one that tells a remarkable story. As our story opens, our Lord has gone to the Temple early in the morning in order to teach the many people who have followed him there. As he is teaching, the teachers of the Law and Pharisees lead a woman who has been caught in adultery into the gathering. The woman has been seized while actively involved sexually with a partner who is not her husband. In a situation of considerable distress, the woman is half-clad and aware that she is facing death. The teachers of the Law and Pharisees show no concern for the woman; they are not interested in her fate, nor in the injured husband, who is never mentioned.¹ They accuse her and challenge Jesus. They know what Moses would do with such a case; but their real desire is to place Christ in a situation where he will appear to be in conflict with Moses and the Law. The woman is but a trapping in the conflict; she is being instrumentalised for the purposes of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees.

Our Lord turns away from this dramatic scene and ignores the question asked of him. He bends down and starts to write in the ground with his finger.² It is impossible to guess what he might have been writing. In the face of this challenge from the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, where the accused woman has become a chattel in a legal

¹ The Law prescribed the death penalty as much for the man concerned as for the woman.

² It may be worth observing that Jesus elsewhere uses the image of the 'finger of God' (Lk 11. 20) to refer to the exercise of divine authority. It was also with 'God's finger' that the Law had been written on the tablets of stone at Sinai (cf. Ex 32. 16).

debate, Jesus's action is best understood as a sign of indifference, and even disappointment with the proceedings.

As the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees continue to ask their question, Christ resumes a standing position and finally enters the debate, insisting that the one without sin should cast the first stone.^{3 4} Although our Lord's challenge is not explicitly stated, it is very likely that the sin he is referring to is sin in the sexual area. Having challenged those who challenged him, he resumes his position, doodling in the dust.

Unwatched, as Jesus bends to the ground, the teachers of the Law and Pharisees drift away, one by one.⁵ Nothing is said of the other people present. They may have also departed, leaving Christ alone with the woman.

The accusers have now become the accused.

Our Lord's words, 'Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?' are the first words addressed to the woman in the story. She is addressed as 'you' and is no longer an object, a necessary evil, but someone who can enter into a relationship with Jesus. Addressing Christ as 'sir', displaying her reverence for him, the woman tells him that no-one condemns her. On the basis of the relationship that is established by this dialogue, our Lord can challenge her to sin no more.

³ Cf. Lev 20. 10, 24. 1-6; Deut 13. 10, 17. 2-7, 22. 22. Notice that the witnesses of the sin were supposed to initiate the stoning. The probability that the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees had arranged the framing of the woman makes this disciplinary action seem all the more 'unjust'.

⁴ By his reply, Jesus is not taking the Law lightly. He is in effect giving permission for the stoning to begin, though only under valid moral conditions.

⁵ This would have occurred in hierarchical order, with the leading Pharisees and teachers of the Law throwing the stones first, followed by their colleagues.

From this moment on, the moment of the adulterous woman's encounter with Jesus, he offers her the double possibility of a new life: 'Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'. The men, and particularly the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in the earlier part of the story, were not even willing to offer her physical life. That has now been restored to her, thanks to the intervention of Christ. But the command to leave her life of sin offers her the possibility of a newness of life in a right relationship with God.

As we mark Ash Wednesday with the celebration of the Eucharist this evening, the story of the adulterous woman leaves us with three significant challenges for Lent.

The first challenge concerns **judgement**. As we have seen, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees did not see that there is a need for consistency in judgement. They thought that they could use the God-given Law as a means for making themselves out to be righteous. They did not realise that the sword of judgement is actually double-edged. In judging others, we judge ourselves; and an unwillingness to pronounce judgement on ourselves undercuts our right to pronounce it on others.

The truth is that we all have sinned and fallen short of God's laws. God's call to all of us, all of the time, is to live holy, godly lives. *Any* deviation from that should concern us, as much in ourselves as in others. As we commence our Lenten journey this year, may God enable us to recognise ourselves afresh as sinners, in need of God's grace; may he spare us from elevating ourselves over those whom we judge; and may he give us the humility to *think before we judge*.

The second challenge in this story concerns **forgiveness**. Our Lord's reaction to the adulterous woman demonstrates in a particular and dramatic way the quality and extent of divine forgiveness. Yes, the sin may be terrible, but sinners are always loved.

It is remarkable that Jesus, who is himself the embodiment of divine holiness, can say to a self-confessed sinner with the guilt of the broken commandment heavy on her heart, 'Neither do I condemn you'. Here is the miracle of the grace of God. There is no greater wonder than this. This simple, powerful sentence is the basis for all of our hope and our salvation for ever.

And will you notice that Christ does more than forgive; he shows mercy. Mercy forgives with compassion. It doesn't give lectures; it restores dignity. In this story, the light of mercy shines into the darkness of condemnation, and it triumphs over justice.

The challenge for some of us this Lent may be to step freely and fully into the forgiving embrace of our God, who is always willing to show his abundant love and mercy. As we prepare for Easter, may God give us fresh new insight and glorious new revelations of who he really is, and how he is disposed towards us.

The third and final challenge of this story concerns **discipleship**. When some people read the story of the encounter between our Lord and the adulterous woman, they think that in the final analysis, her adultery does not matter. Yet this was not Jesus's point at all. His last words to the woman are very important. If she has been forgiven, and if she has been rescued from imminent death, she must live by that forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same thing as 'tolerance'. Being forgiven does not mean that sin does not matter. On the contrary, forgiveness means that sin *does* matter, but that God is choosing to set it aside.

The forgiveness and mercy that Christ extends to the adulterous woman lead him to challenge her to 'go on your way, and from now on do not sin again'. He forgives her so that 'from now on', she will sin no more. Only divine love and divine forgiveness received with a sincere and open heart give us the strength to resist evil and to 'sin no more'. As we allow ourselves to be struck with God's love, it becomes our strength.

This Lent, may we, you and I, place God's love and forgiveness at the centre of our lives; may we find our strength in God's love; and may we go forward in this strength in a closer walk with him.

Amen.