

TWO ARE LEFT

Joel 2. 1-2, 12-17
2 Corinthians 5. 20b-6. 10
John 8. 2-11

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

The account of ‘The Woman Caught in Adultery’ is a vivid, powerful story that may be considered to be one of the most popular stories in the New Testament. Curiously enough, as the text notes for this chapter of St John’s gospel tell us, this story did not figure in the earliest Biblical manuscripts; and it therefore must have been added later. We can be glad that it was added, however, because this story provides us with fundamental insights concerning sin, and the grace and mercy of God.

The story unfolds as the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery to Jesus. Christ is seated, as he has been teaching in the Temple; and this woman, who has been caught in what the French would call *flagrant délit*, is made to stand (most likely naked) before our Lord.

The scribes and Pharisees present their legal case, but immediately we see that there are several irregularities. Firstly, they provide no witnesses to testify that the woman was caught in the ‘very act’ of adultery.¹ Jesus is therefore not provided with the information necessary to make a proper decision. Secondly, the scribes and Pharisees speak as if Mosaic law requires the death penalty for adulterous women *only*, and completely ignore the fate of her male sexual partner. Yet Mosaic law is clear: both the man and the woman involved stand under the death penalty.²

¹ Cf. Deut 17. 6; 19. 15.

² Cf. Lev 20. 10; Deut 22. 22.

We see that the scribes and Pharisees are not at all interested in Christ's interpretation of the Mosaic law; they only want to entrap him. If our Lord upholds the law of Moses and agrees that the woman should be stoned, he can be reported to the Roman authorities for inciting murder. If he lets the woman go free, he can be accused of blasphemy against the holy Jewish law.

Jesus' response to the test is given in two remarkably balanced parts. In both parts, he makes a non-verbal, and then a verbal response. As Christ bends down and begins to write with his finger in the ground, he indicates his refusal to answer the question as the scribes and Pharisees have posed it. The story gives no information about the content of what our Lord writes, because it is the act of writing itself that is important. In the Mediterranean world of Jesus' time, such an act of writing would have been recognised as an act of refusal and disengagement.³

The scribes' and Pharisees' continued pressing of their question shows that they recognise Christ's writing as an act of refusal, not as offering an answer. When our Lord finally straightens up and addresses them directly, he does not answer their legal question, but moves beyond the legal argument to the more encompassing issue of sin.⁴ Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees to accountability for their past actions and hence their own relationship to the law, which (by the way) they have been willing to distort to press their case against Jesus.

³ The fact that Jesus writes on the ground has some profound Christological implications. His actions signal his unwillingness to engage in the categories of the Pharisees and scribes and his unwillingness to allow them to exercise any control in the situation. When our Lord does speak, he speaks to the situation of the scribes and Pharisees as well as to the woman. The scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus as an object to be manipulated for their own ends, but Christ treats the woman, the scribes and Pharisees as theological equals, humans to whom words about sin can be addressed. Our Lord offers the opportunity to break with old ways and to enter a world marked by freedom and acquittal.

This story is one in which Jesus puts his authority up against the claims of the Jewish religious establishment. By his very presence, Christ challenges the law and the power of those who claim the authority to interpret the law. Our Lord brings the promise of freedom to all; but that freedom demands a renunciation of old ways and former claims.

⁴ The notion here of 'sin' is 'sin linked to actions'.

In verse 8 of our text, Christ resumes his writing on the ground, indicating that he is finished with the scribes and Pharisees. The actions of the scribes, Pharisees (and the rest of the crowd) are their answer to the challenge that our Lord has given them. None of them is sinless, not even the elders, the most senior and revered members of the Jewish community.

Jesus straightens up to address the woman, just as he did with the scribes and Pharisees. This is the first time that the woman has been addressed in the story. Prior to this verse, she has only been an object for the Jewish leaders to use in their entrapment of Christ. His questions and the woman's response confirm what we know from verse 9: there is no-one left to condemn her. And his words to her in verse 11 – 'Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again' – invite her to embrace a new future that will allow her to live as a free, and not as a condemned woman.

When St Augustine wrote his homily about this gospel text, he described that poignant moment when the adulterous woman found herself alone with Jesus once the scribes and Pharisees had left. Summing the moment up, Augustine wrote: 'Two are left, misery and mercy.'⁵ *Misera et misericordia*. It is a neat turn of phrase.

If any of you are Latin scholars, you will know that the words that we use during the season of Lent are important; they matter. We talk, for example, about penitence. In English, penitence is all about being sorry for our sins and our faults. The Latin root word⁶ behind penitence, however, has much more to do with paying a debt, or incurring a punishment. And when this Latin word is translated into Greek⁷, it has yet another meaning: it means the amendment of life.

⁵ 'Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia'

⁶ 'poenitentia' (root='poena')

⁷ 'metanoia'

Lent asks us some important questions. Do we need to pay our debts and suffer punishment? Or do we need to amend our lives? In his homily, St Augustine hints at something more. That Latin word *miser cordia* which he uses means mercy; but it actually combines two root words which mean ‘misery’ and ‘heart’. So when he says, ‘Two are left, misery and mercy’, he is actually saying, ‘Two are left, misery and misery taken to heart.’

If we are wondering what to do this Lent, this is where we can start. Firstly, we can stop thinking that sin is something ‘out there’; it is ‘in here’ (place hand on heart). Sin is not just what we do occasionally, or what other people do a lot; sin is who we are and what we are like. David, the author of Psalm 19, knew this when he wrote: ‘Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me.’ We all have hidden faults and wilful sins which we need to confess before God; and we all need to accept our responsibility for causing offence or harm to others.

I heard a story about a man who said to his Orthodox priest that he thought that confession was useless for him – he didn’t do all those disgusting things that other people do. The priest replied that he should tell this to his wife and children and come back in the morning to tell the priest if he still did not want to confess. In the morning, the man came back a different person...and with a very long list. We all need to take our sin to heart.

But when we have done this, and when we have begun to be truly sorry, we are then invited to remember that our Lord comes to us and takes *us to heart*. This Lent, as always, Christ stands in front of us and says, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’ We, who are caught up in the misery of sin, have the unfailing, eternal promise of the gift of mercy – freely given and totally undeserved.

Today and during this Lent, let us accept the gift of God's grace and resolve to live a new life; an amended life; a life free of condemnation.

Amen.