

## WHEN LOVE MAKES GOD TREMBLE

Joel 2. 1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5. 20b-21, 6. 1-10

John 8. 1-11

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

Just the other day, someone asked me why I was setting out purple vestments in the sacristy, and I replied, ‘because it’s Ash Wednesday, and the beginning of Lent.’ And then the person said, ‘Oh yes. Lent. That’s the “give up” season.’

She is not the only one to think of Lent in such a way. Many of us have been brought up to forego something in Lent as part of our spiritual discipline, a discipline that we undertake in the hopes of drawing nearer to God as we prepare for Easter. Some of us may decide to give up chocolate, or other sweets, or alcohol; and I admire those who do so.

But when I think of those of us who undertake such spiritual disciplines in Lent, I often wonder what our *underlying perception of God is* as we decide to engage in such practices. Do we think, for example, that God will not be ‘happy’ with us unless we decide to give up something? Or do we think that by forgoing something that is normally dear to us, we will in some way ‘earn back’ God’s favour, after having lost it because of our sinfulness? Personally, I am not sure that such perceptions of God are either well-founded or helpful.

It is in this context that I would like to talk briefly about the famous scene that is narrated in our appointed gospel passage for today, Ash Wednesday. Not many famous paintings have been devoted to the account of the woman caught in adultery, but it is easy for us to imagine the story in our minds. And for a moment, without

wishing to ‘embellish’ the gospel text in any way, I would like to ask you to create a mental picture of the scene. Imagine the poor woman, caught in the very act of adultery, perhaps by her husband, or by one of the religious officials of Jerusalem, or by both. It would not be an exaggeration, I think, to presume that those who found her took her by force to our Lord as he sat teaching in the Temple.

Perhaps she attempted to flee from those who discovered her; or perhaps she tried to resist them, knowing full well what awaited her. She may have stumbled and fallen as they led her away; and perhaps, once she fell, they simply dragged her as she lay on the ground and brought her to Jesus.

However it was that she arrived, when (as our text says) the woman was made to stand before Christ, we can well imagine that she was trembling. Trembling in shame, perhaps; but more likely trembling in terror. There she was, a woman caught in adultery, and she knew that she would soon be brutally killed for her deed.

We do not, unfortunately, know what our Lord actually wrote with his finger as he bent down and drew in the ground. We do, nevertheless, have a record of what he said as he straightened up: ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And then he bent down again to write in the sand.

As we consider how the story ends, and how Jesus said to the woman, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way and from now on do not sin again’; I would like to suggest that Christ responded to the woman’s *trembling with terror* with his *own type of trembling*.

I believe that on that day our Lord was *trembling with compassion*. Allow me to explain.

Compassion is a very powerful word. For some people, compassion is sometimes seen as a weak emotion, a 'giving in' to feelings. Others even confuse the word compassion with the word empathy. Both words are about feelings; but while empathy is about understanding someone's feelings, compassion is more a state of entering through those feelings *into the life of the person* in a very active way. Literally, compassion means to 'suffer with'.

In the scriptures, however, compassion is an even stronger word, given its origins in Greek and in Hebrew. In the gospels, for example, the Greek word for compassion (which is used only twelve times to refer to Jesus or to the Father) has at its root the same words as the gut, or our intestines. In Hebrew, on the other hand, the word for compassion has an even stronger root, a word that describes the womb of God.

So when the Bible talks about compassion and a compassionate God, it is saying that God feels the state of the universe and its suffering in himself. And when Christ is moved with compassion (as he was, drawing in the sand in front of the woman caught in adultery) it is as if his insides are turned upside down and churned up.

Talking about compassion, the Belgian priest Henri Nouwen wrote this: 'Compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in (our Lord) that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden...When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.'

What beautiful words! At the beginning this Lent, you and I are called to into a relationship with our compassionate God. As we journey to Holy Week and Easter, we will have the chance to discover again the tenderness of God and his yearning to

be known by us, his children. How is this possible? Through Christ, the Word made flesh.

When he came to earth, our Lord revealed his compassionate nature as he reached out to those in need. He had compassion on the crowds who followed him, because they were helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>1</sup> He had compassion on them and cured the sick.<sup>2</sup> He had compassion on the four thousand who flocked to hear him but who were hungry.<sup>3</sup> He had compassion on the two blind men outside of Jericho and restored their sight.<sup>4</sup> He had compassion on the widow at Nain who had lost her only son.<sup>5</sup> And God's compassionate nature was made visible through Jesus's wounds of love on the Cross.

In a few moments, you and I will have ash placed on our foreheads as a reminder of our mortality and as a symbol of our penitence. The mark of ash, however, is a mark of the beginning of our Lenten journey; it is not an end in itself. The ash is there to call us to think again about our journey of life and where we are going. It is an encouragement to think about our state of life and what needs to change, as we respond to our compassionate God.

Our journey this Lent is in fact a journey to the Cross. This Lent, we will walk again alongside Christ as he makes his own way to Calvary. And as we gaze once more on his loving wounds, we will discover afresh that God trembles with love for us whenever we return to him.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mt 9.36.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mt 14. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mt 15. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mt 20. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lk 7. 13.