

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL



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FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

3rd April 2022

John 8:1 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

This Sunday we break from the gospel of Luke and take a story from the gospel of John. It has been selected because it deals with the theme of forgiveness. As with last Sunday’s gospel, so too here we see two different attitudes to the mercy of God. This time, however, it is not in a parable but in a real incident in which those with a narrow view of the mercy of God wish to use the misery of this woman as an opportunity for point scoring against Jesus.

For the Pharisees, the scriptures are being read with a view to making them powerful as judges and experts in the Law.

For Jesus the scriptures are to be read as a way to understand the overwhelming mercy of God.

In highlighting their hypocrisy, Jesus calls them to repentance.

In highlighting God’s love for her, he calls the woman to a new life.

SEAN GOAN—Let the Reader Understand, Year B

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This well-loved and remembered story has more than one meaning. It is, of course, a story of compassion and forgiveness. It is also a story about Jesus, his person and his authority. His style is instructive: a refusal to engage with the categories of judgment forced upon him.

This narrative is missing from early and important manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel, for example Papyrus 66 and the Codex Sinaiticus. No Greek church father, prior to the twelfth century, comments on it. If you skip from 7:52 to 8:12, the text is seamless. The vocabulary (Mount of Olives, daybreak, teacher) is Lucan rather than Johannine. It seems to be a floating tradition, found elsewhere in the manuscript tradition: Jn 7:36; 7:44; 21:25 and more fittingly in Lk 21:38. It is not, therefore, part of John’s Gospel or theology.

Nevertheless, it could very easily be historical. Augustine says people (“enemies of the true faith”) excised the text, lest promiscuity be treated leniently! Although definitely not part of the ancient text, the story is accepted by all churches as canonical.

Thought for the day

The rush to judgment—so evident in our public discourse—is matched only by the resistance to forgiveness. Endlessly, we investigate, accuse, judge. As we all know, what is needed eventually is forgiveness—but where do we find it? In the Christian vision we do not have to carry the burden of our guilt forever precisely “because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed.” (Rom 3:25 NET) In the current idiom, “we do forgiveness” and so we should!

KIERAN O’MAHONY OSA—www.tarsus.ie

General Comments

There are three people in today's passage.

As always, in your meditation you must let yourself enter the story from the viewpoint of one of the three.

- The woman was guilty of a sexual sin, but her story evokes any experience of having done something shameful in a moment of great vulnerability.
- The scribes and Pharisees are typical of powerful people who have no feeling for the weak. There are several things about them that might touch you: that they have singled out this one sin for condemnation; that they are using the woman to score points against Jesus; or that they use pious phrases to mask their cruelty – all types of behaviour that are easily recognizable.
- This picture of Jesus is one of the most touching in the gospels; look at his action of bending down and writing on the ground. It suggests tremendous inner strength which, in a non-violent way, unmasks the hypocrisy of the accusers.

Scripture Reflection

“One form of gentleness we should practice is towards ourselves.

It is reasonable to be displeased and sorry when we commit faults, but not fretful or spiteful to ourselves.” St Francis de Sales

Lord, teach us to look at ourselves with respect and compassion, as Jesus looked at the woman taken in adultery when he was left alone with her and she remained standing before him.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL – Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Compassion for human frailty combined with a gentle challenge to a better life marked the response of Jesus. From whom have you experienced a compassionate challenge? What was that like for you? To whom have you given such a challenge?
2. The Pharisees and scribes self-righteously condemned the woman until Jesus brought them in touch with their own sinfulness. This was a conversion moment for them and they turned away from their quest for the death of the woman. Have there been times when your awareness of your own fragility and sinfulness has helped you to be less judgemental of others?
3. “What do you say?” can be an embarrassing question. Jesus had the courage to voice an opinion, even though it was against the party line of the day. When you have seen that courage shown – by yourself, or by another? What was the result?

JOHN BYRNE OSA – Intercom

Jesus does not condemn the woman in this story. A key piece of this passage draws attention to his demeanour.

We live in a stone-throwing society, one that cares little for the circumstances that lead people into their particular situations. We want someone to blame and the sooner the better. Those who accuse others often do so because they find inward reflection too difficult. Here, Jesus encourages religious leaders out of that mentality and back to their own individual reality: ‘Let anyone among you who is without is be the first to throw a stone at her.’

Everyone makes mistakes and we all need forgiveness from time to time. As we approach the Easter season, remember that Jesus can and wants to free us from these burdens and invites us to start again each time. This gospel also challenges us to relate compassionately to others. It is in this way that we can rediscover our common humanity.

Compassion is one of the many characteristics of a follower of Christ. How have people shown you compassion? Reflect this week on how you can be more compassionate with others.

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT – Go Deeper

The Pharisees bring before Jesus a woman caught in adultery. Everyone present is aware of her fate. She will be stoned to death according to the Law. No one speaks of the man, her partner. As always in a male dominated society the woman is condemned and the man goes unnamed.

The story shows how wonderful Jesus can be. At last there appears on earth someone who is not influenced by any law or oppressive power, someone free and big-hearted who has never hated or condemned anyone, who has not returned evil for evil. There is more truth and justice in his defence and forgiveness of the woman than in all our bitter demands and condemnations.

Christians have not yet been able to realise and work out all the consequences for women's liberation from oppression that the attitude and practice of Jesus entail. In a church largely led and influenced by males, we fail to become aware of all the injustices women continue to suffer in all spheres of life. One theologian, therefore, spoke about “*the revolution unknown to Christianity.*”

The fact remains that after twenty centuries in supposedly Christian countries, a woman cannot move about freely without a lurking fear of men. Does not the suffering of women have to be reflected for more powerfully and realistically in our liturgical services and find a more important place in our work of social awareness? Do we not above all, have to be more available to help any and all oppressed women, to denounce abuses and provide effective protection for them?

JOSÉ A PAGOLA – Following in the Footsteps of Jesus, Year B