

7th April 2019 (Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C)

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 125(126); Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11.

'Did no one condemn you? ... I do not condemn you either!'

Often I meet people who are afraid of God, described as a judge who will come and condemn them to eternal death, away from his Love. In last week's gospel reading of the parable of the lost sons and the forgiving father, we heard Jesus describe the Father's merciful love. This shown especially in the way he forgives and accepts his younger son back into the family, and when he goes out of his way to plead with the older son, inviting him too into the family celebration.

While last week's gospel reading was a parable, this week's gospel is a real-life situation where Jesus is asked to sit in judgement over a woman caught in the act of adultery. The evangelist tells us clearly that the accusers had not brought the woman to Jesus out of any concern for her spiritual good, but for the purely political reason to test him and have a reason to accuse him.

One can certainly feel for the poor woman caught up in this situation. She is probably dragged away from her bed half dressed, and taken to the temple court in front of a whole crowd of people. While everyone in the crowd is looking at the woman accusing her for her adulterous behaviour, Jesus simply looks away. He shows respect towards the woman by stooping down and scribbling in the sand under his feet.

Obviously the accusers want blood: is Jesus going to bite? So he straightens up and looks directly at the accusers. Anyone who, putting his hand on his heart, can say that he is totally clean from any sin, can take it upon himself to throw the first stone! How often have we found ourselves in similar situations? How often have we come across people who we think should be condemned for their sins? People involved in abortions, those divorced and re-married, others living in irregular relationships, people who do not practice their religious duties, and various others who we can very easily accuse of grave sinfulness. Jesus invites us to take a step back and reflect on our own life. Am I clean enough from any sin to be able to stand in judgement over these sisters and brothers of mine? Jesus, the one born without any trace of sin, invites us to examine ourselves. Am I without sin?

The beauty of this story is that after everyone has left the scene, Jesus straightens up once again, this time faces the woman and, forgiving her all her sins, sends her away healed. In both this week's narrative and in last week's parable, one can point out that the sinner is not necessarily sorry for the sins committed. This week the woman is dragged involuntarily in front of Jesus, and in last week's parable, the younger son is more interested in being fed rather than in apologising to his father. Yet in both cases, unconditional forgiveness is forthcoming. Jesus does not sit there waiting for the woman to own up to her sin, nor does the Father wait for the full confession from his son. In both cases God is the one who takes the first step.

All I have to do is to humbly present myself to his presence. God, the merciful judge, is always ready and willing to find an excuse to forgive us our many sins. In two weeks' time we once again celebrate the memory of the saving passion death and resurrection of Jesus. Through this death and resurrection, Jesus has already saved us and redeemed us from all our sins, what is now required from us is to stand in front of him and ask for his mercy.

Paul in the reading from the letter to the Philippians acknowledges that he is not perfect. As long as he lives this live here on earth, he too is a sinner and depends on Jesus' saving love. Paul's commitment is to continually push forward, trying to achieve the holiness given to us by Christ, trusting that God's mercy will cover all our sinfulness.

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