Homily – 5th Sunday of Lent (C)

*Is. 43:16-21, Phil. 3:8-14 & Jn. 8:1-11*

I must admit I got a surprise when I first looked at this Sunday’s readings earlier this week. Given that we are in Year C, I had rather expected that today’s gospel would be from St Luke, just as on all the previous Sundays of Lent, and again next Sunday when we hear his Passion. Instead, we have this famous passage from St John suddenly interposed. It seems rather strange. We are used, perhaps, to hearing St John in Yr.A, where the great stories of the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus illustrate the great mysteries of Baptism – living water, new sight and illumination, and resurrection – for those preparing to receive the sacraments at Easter. We are used to hearing John also in Yr.B, both in Lent and in the summer, since Mark’s gospel is simply too short to cover an entire liturgical year. But there is plenty of “Lenten” material in Luke, plenty which focuses on compassion and mercy throughout his gospel. So why the Johannine intrusion?

What makes it even stranger is that scripture scholars are generally agreed that today’s story does not actually “belong” in John’s gospel at all. Its style is very different from John’s usual writing, where each episode allows Jesus the opportunity to offer some lengthy teaching in discourse form. That does not happen here. The opponents of Jesus are described as the “scribes and Pharisees”; this is a common feature of the Synoptics, but is rare in John, who normally describes them as “the Jews”. Somewhat ironically, the opening sentence – with Jesus withdrawing by himself before re-entering the Temple at daybreak – has suggested to some that this story *actually* comes from the materials used by Luke in his writing, but not included by him in his gospel! All, though, are agreed that it *is* a genuine story from the oral traditions about Jesus’ life, but was overlooked until it found a “lodging” (as it were) in John.

The story is one of the most beautiful episodes in the gospels. The scribes and Pharisees are seeking ways of attacking Jesus’ teaching, seeking opportunities to silence him. They catch this woman in the act of adultery and bring her to Jesus, hoping that he will contradict or condemn the teaching of Moses. It is clear that they don’t actually care about the woman herself – her life or death does not matter to them in the slightest. What they *really* want is an excuse to kill Jesus. But, as always, Jesus refuses to play ball. Initially, he just seems to ignore them – perhaps disappointed or frustrated by the malice of their actions – focussing on the ground, where he is writing in the dust, not even bothering to look at them. But they are persistent, and eventually their nagging brings forth that amazing riposte: *If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her*. And then, dismissively, he returns to his doodling and – one by one – they drift away. Jesus has avoided their trap. He has neither criticised Moses, nor actively championed this sinful woman. Rather, he has opened their eyes to their own hypocrisy, their own readiness to judge others harshly whilst hiding their own secret shame. One by one, beginning with the eldest, they come to their senses and leave.

Then only the woman and Jesus are left, and they talk. For the first time in the story, someone addresses her as a person. She is no longer a “thing”, no longer a handy “object” for the Pharisees and scribes to use for their own ends. She is a “subject”, a person – and Jesus says: *Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you.* The Fathers of the Church have always seen a two-fold gift of life in that intimate conversation, for Jesus has not only saved the woman from stoning – the first gift – but also tells her to go and not sin any more – he offers a new opportunity for her to live life to the full, but in a different way, a way of conversion. She has been snatched from the jaws of death, but also given a new vision about just how precious and how precarious life is. For her, that awful encounter with Jesus is a transformative moment.

And yet, for some perhaps, Jesus’ actions leave a moral dilemma. His mercy, his compassion are all very well, but where is justice? The woman is clearly guilty – does she *deserve* such mercy, or does she not in fact deserve the *punishment* that was planned? Or does Jesus not really care about sin? Does he not care about the woman’s husband and family, the violent disruption which adultery always brings in its wake? Does Jesus just not care about the sanctity of marriage? What gives him the right to refuse to condemn this sinful woman?

These are real questions, uncomfortable though they may be, but they are questions which take us to the very heart of the gospel. Jesus clearly understands and cares deeply about sin and its consequences – if he did not, he would never have been able to say to the accusers: *Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone*. It is only his deep understanding of our human weakness, our shame, our guilt, our slavery to sin, which leads him to speak those words, and to know that they will find an echo in the accusers’ hearts. As for the woman, at the human level he must have understood just what she would have to face in the future – disgrace, shame, public humiliation, the long slow process of the rebuilding of relationships and friendships after such a public scandal. He must have understood that, in some ways, being stoned to death was the easier option for her – all over in a few moments – and yet he offers her the challenge, the *real* challenge of reconciliation and a future life, a life undoubtedly scarred by the memory of this episode, but a life transformed by her encounter with him.

And what gives him the right to show mercy? Well, there at least the answer is obvious. Jesus knows only too well that there is a price to pay for sin, always a price to pay. And he also knows that the woman – the woman who stands there as a type, a symbol of every sinner, of each one of us – cannot afford to pay that price; we cannot redeem ourselves. And so, in his infinite goodness, he pays that price himself. He has the *right* to show mercy, since he is the only one willing and able to pay the whole price of human sin, from Adam until the end of time. Like that woman, each one of us deserves punishment and not mercy, deserves stoning and not new life, for we are all sinners. The mystery and the wonder of our salvation is that, despite this, Jesus freely chooses to die that we might have life, gratuitously chooses to pay the price of our redemption in his own precious blood. No wonder that Paul can say with such conviction: *I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*.

Jesus cares very deeply about our sinfulness – but he wants our conversion, not our destruction. He cares so deeply that he died to free us from sin, so deeply that he died that we too might, each one of us, hear those words he spoke to the woman: *Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more*. What marvels the Lord has worked for us – indeed, we should be glad!

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