

21 March 2010
5th Sunday of Lent

The Word
Turning the Tables
John 8:1-11

It was certainly a man's world. In today's gospel we see these lecherous men, old and young, the so-called pillars of society, at their very worst. Of course, legally, they were within their rights. The law said that an adulteress should be put to death. So, let Jesus cast the first stone. They had him trapped. If Jesus complied and added his condemnation of the woman to theirs, he was sure to lose his reputation as the "friend of sinners."

If he said the woman should be pardoned, he was teaching them to break the law of Moses and he was condoning and even encouraging people to commit adultery. They waited, gloating, on his answer. Jesus took his time. He sat down on his hunkers and slowly began to write in the dust ... What? What did he write?

There is an ancient tradition that he began to write down the sins of the self-righteous men who stood round him. Only then, when he had shown them that he knew them through and through, did he give his answer: "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him throw the first stone." And he began to write some more.

The tables were turned. Now it was the turn of the Scribes and Pharisees to be embarrassed. If Jesus were to reveal everything he obviously knew about them, it was they who would lose their reputation for being holy men, and maybe it was they who would be facing the stoning squad. They quickly made themselves scarce and scurried off like frightened puppies. Jesus was left alone with the woman. He quietly uttered a line which has given hope and courage to people through the centuries: "I do not condemn you; go and sin no more." Hold on to this. You will never hear better news.

Reflect

Did you know that this story of the adulterous woman was so shocking that it was omitted from many of the early manuscripts of the Gospel? It sounded like Jesus had gone soft on sin. He was too lenient.

The truth is Jesus looked into the woman's soul and saw that she was more sinned against than sinning. She was the victim of male lust, not the cause of it. The ones who wanted to stone her were the very ones who had used and abused her. Jesus was probably the first man ever to look at her without lust in his heart. He saw her pain and fear, and his glance of love healed her - that same glance of love which had exposed the guilty consciences of her accusers and made them sling away.

Throughout Lent we have heard Jesus say, "I have not come to condemn but to save." Here we see this attitude in action. No matter how great the sin, the love of Christ is greater still. He has no wish to condemn but to bring healing and forgiveness. Even the woman's accusers would have found the same generous forgiveness if only they could step out from the shadows of their own self-righteousness. As Easter approaches, don't let such love and such forgiveness go a-begging.

Do

One of the most common human failings is to demand standards of others which we cannot reach ourselves or to condemn faults in others which are glaringly obvious in our own lives.

How quick are you to judge others? Take some time today to look at your life and examine your conscience.

Learn

- * The Lord is compassion and love.
- * Only God has the right to judge others.

Say

“Lord, help me to be compassionate and merciful as you are compassionate and merciful.”

Pray

Pray today for all those who have been the victims of unjust judgement and persecution.