

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent March 13, 2016**

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

We are just one week away from the Holy Week and away from our celebration of God's love shown in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. For us Christians this season of Lent is a time of special grace in which we experience the presence of a personal God who cares and loves us. Our response is to transform ourselves and live according to his will. We want to do something new and come to him in obedience and freedom. Before him we acknowledge our weakness and we know that he is the one who supports us and builds with us new relationship. We ought to change our lives during Lent and come closer to him. Therefore the Church calls this season as a joyful time, because it is our preparation for the future joy of Easter that approaches us bringing his blessings, mercy and forgiveness. As we approach to the end of our Lenten season, we are reminded of our last opportunity to cooperate with God's graces and his benevolent love. It is he invites us to enter deep into his mystery and look for his unlimited love. We have to Gospel of today telling us of the woman caught in the act of adultery. He protects her and forgives her totally not before asking her to reform her life. Certainly she would choose to be his follower for through forgiveness he brought divine love in her.

During today's First Reading, we heard the prophetic Words of the Lord God speaking to the prophet Isaiah. Yahweh begins by identifying Himself. He says that it was He who created Israel. It was He who led the Exodus of His people under the leadership of Moses. It was He who divided the Red Sea and who destroyed the great army of the Pharaoh of Egypt. It was He who quenched the life out of the enemies of His people. Yet he tells them to look ahead and not look back into the past. The past always closes our minds does not allow us to see things of the present as they are. Therefore the Lord promises to the people "I am about to do a new thing." In other words at every moment he creates new things for us. He adds further to say "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; and former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." The Prophet also says that God promising to make a way in the wilderness or the desert, to put rivers in the desert and that would make the wild animals honour Him. His presence makes all things new for the sake of humanity. The people have plenty of reason to praise God for all the gifts.

In the second reading of today Paul tells the church of Philippi to break away from their past. Paul presents his mature reflections on how much God loves him, written some twenty years after his vision of conversion. The search of his whole

life has been the right relationship with God. Indeed we see Paul filling himself only with Jesus and cutting out all rubbish from his life: “I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” In his search for perfection he observed all the rules and norms as a Pharisee, but ultimately he found the meaning in Christ. He accepted the loss of all things that he might gain Christ. To him to know Christ did not mean solely the intellectual knowledge but it was to gain personal experience of him the saviour. Earlier in the same letter Paul said, “Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus.” Then all our sufferings become not a penalty but a privilege. Finally because of these marvellous blessings that we have received from God, St. Paul urges his church to act as aliens and exiles, to abstain from the desires of the flesh. He receives the assurance from Jesus not because of his own efforts but from the fact that Jesus has taken possession of him.

The Gospel of today places before us an episode that emphasises the need to examine ourselves and to avoid passing any judgement on others. Generally there is a tendency within us to find fault in others and condemn them. Again, we maintain our long memories of the hurts and forgiveness does not come easily. During the Eucharist we ask repeatedly forgiveness from the Lord and yet we hold back so much of grudge in our hearts. As we approach the end of the Lenten season, we are reminded of the great opportunity to cooperate with God’s special graces. The theme that pervades through the readings is that God makes all things new. The Gospel of today presents us a sharp contrast between the cruelty and wickedness of the scribes and Pharisees and the compassion of Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees had no regard for the woman caught in adultery and brought her to the master. They were only interested in using her to try to trap Jesus. They had no regard for the fact that she may not have initiated the sin; she may have been led into it by their own men. But Jesus is full of compassion. Jesus handles delicately this serious offence. He challenges both the accused and the accusers: he calls on both to look deep into their hearts and examine them. Jesus has his final words to the woman “go away and don’t sin any more” and these words will never be forgotten till the end of times. Jesus transforms her into a new person.

Jesus places a bigger challenge before the accusers. He asks them to consider their own actions and their own shortcomings. He tells them to look into themselves before passing any judgement on others. He bends down and writes into the mud or sand. No one knows what Jesus wrote on the ground but some people suspect Jesus wrote the sins of the scribes and Pharisees. Notice also that it was the eldest

who went away first. Perhaps the eldest had committed more sins; the persons who had lived longer had more to be sorry about in their own lives. Although Jesus has forgiven the woman her sin he expects her to live from now on a life of grace and union with God by not sinning any more. Jesus doesn't say that sin does not matter because sin does matter and damages our relationship with God. He only tells her not to sin anymore and to change her life completely. He restores the woman again, in two ways. He restores her spiritually by forgiving her, telling her he did not condemn her, while also insisting that she not sin again, and he restores her to society by saving her life and grants her forgiveness. In this story, the Scribes and Pharisees are presented as sinners, perhaps worse sinners than the woman. Not in their own eyes, of course, but in the eyes of Jesus and his Gospel they are totally lacking in the virtue of compassion. Their intention was to trap Jesus and put him to shame and ultimately it is they who go away in shame. The Pharisees and the Scribes were persons proud and arrogant, and they sat in judgment on others. They had no idea how to love, how to forgive but only how to observe the Law externally. They do not love the people that God loves.

However, there is another element in the story which is not explicitly mentioned but is strongly implied. The woman has been dragged before Jesus as a pawn in a game. They wanted to find fault with Jesus on the observance of the law and his application to human kindness. They tell him that Moses had ordered in the Law to condemn such women to death by stoning. What is the response of Jesus? They hoped to put the rabbi who ate and drank with sinners, on a collision course with the sacred traditions coming from Moses. They hoped to condemn him from his own mouth. But, if he agreed with Moses, he belied his own teaching and behaviour with sinners; but, if he rejected the Law of Moses, he could be denounced and labelled as no man of God. Further, the Jews had no authority to pass death sentence on any one. If they did they were punishable before the Roman law and Jesus would be accused as a person breaking the law. Jesus knew the trap too well and refused to give them any answer. But his knowledge surpasses all human knowledge that tells of love and forgiveness and the nameless woman is the beneficiary.

Once Jesus challenged them regarding their own sinfulness, they move away one by one and St John says very clearly, beginning with the eldest. They knew too well that they had to be honest regarding their sinfulness and they could not publicly accuse a person while they were sinful. Only person who could have thrown the stone at the woman was Jesus himself and being a kind person he would rather give forgiveness. Now only Jesus and the woman are left. Her accusers were all gone and the one person remaining is not going to accuse her.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go away and do not sin anymore." Unlike the Pharisees and Scribes, upholders of the Law, Jesus refuses to condemn her. Instead he gives her an opportunity to repent, to convert and change her ways. Jesus shows that he has come not to condemn but to save, to rehabilitate and to give new and enduring life.

Now let us look at Jesus in this scene. First of all, Jesus does not deny the woman's sin and before the law this was a grievous sin. Adultery involved an intimate sexual liaison between two people, at least one of whom is already married. It is a serious breach of trust in the marriage relationship and a serious act of injustice to the innocent partner in the marriage. The seriousness is really in this breach of trust and the injustice to one's partner rather than the sexual activities, which, in this case, are secondary. The scribes and Pharisees go to great lengths in their opposition to Jesus. They even say to him as to what he has to say. By doing so, they are trying to make Jesus turn away from his proper mission. For Jesus is there, among them, not to judge the words of man, but to witness to the Word of the Father whom he is in person: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." (Jn. 14:10). The story does not tell us whether the woman was married or not. What is admitted by all - by Jesus, the Pharisees and the woman herself - is that she sinned. He is the one who forgives her and gives her a new life.

Contemplating on the Gospel passage, we see that Jesus has won the test and the woman has retained her life. He now tells the woman not to sin again as he does not approve any sin and since sin is so horrible and horrific he wants her to take steps to ensure that she lives a changed life. On his part he forgives her which is a divine act. In reality the first step the person has to take is to deal with the source of sin, namely, the mind. Among the Native Americans there is a story of a father who said there were two wolves fighting within him, one bad and one good. His son asked which wolf wins and the father said whichever wolf he feeds the most. What Jesus instructs is that we need to fill our minds with what is good instead of with rubbish. The woman in this story is not just an isolated sinner. She represents all of us. She represents every person who has sinned. She represents the Scribes and Pharisees, who were sinners too, who were also the accusers. Our sins are those of commission and also of self-righteousness. Then we hurt others by setting ourselves up as superior as and better than others.

In the Word of God today, we heard the divine message that God makes all things new. Jesus gives us a basic command that helps us to identify if we are on our way to reach closer to him we must persevere in our living faith. Jesus said to the woman as he tells us: "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." Once a

person is touched by God and once he has received that divine command he cannot remain the same. That was the experience of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul and several others who came into close contact with him and remained persons attached to Jesus. Therefore Peter in his letter tells us "We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light." Therefore he says that we should conduct ourselves honourably among the non-believers, so that, though they malign us as evildoers, they may see our honourable deeds and glorify God when He comes to judge. In other words the lesson we carry home is that we have to be the living examples of Christ in the world.

Those who shouted for justice and demanded a condign punishment for this adulteress were themselves filled with injustice and sin. This is not uncommon in today's world as it was during the time of Jesus. Of course, we need human justice, imperfect though it may be. But what a scandal it is to see a State, no matter which, claiming to render equitable justice, when it respects neither natural law nor the rights of God. We notice here the basic principle of Jesus: we as human beings must not judge another. The quality needed for final and definitive judging is not knowledge which many people have but goodness which God has and uses it in judging others. So Jesus asks them to be the judges of themselves and then put the Law of Moses into practice. Jesus on the other hand never judges and this must have been a great relief for the woman. In the treatment of Jesus to the woman, justice and mercy have met. He builds the hearts of people and does not destroy them.

Once a man was driving along the country road lost his way. Looking for some person to receive fresh direction, he went ahead and discovered a farm house with a man working in the field and an elderly woman sitting right in front of the house doing some little odd things. The old man in the farm was whistling clearly and loudly and he was certainly looked out of tune. To overcome his curiosity and also to find directions the man went there to him and asked for directions which he got instantly. Then he asked why he was whistling all the while and it must be part of his work. The man said that he has been married for 45 years and the couple has been happy together. But suddenly his wife lost her sight and became helpless. In order to acknowledge his closeness to her and his presence he whistles all the while and she knows he is close to her.

A member of a monastic order once committed a fault. A council was called to determine the punishment, but when the monks assembled it was noticed that Father Joseph was not among them. The superior sent someone to say to him,

“Come, for everyone is waiting for you.” So Father Joseph got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water, and carried it with him. When the others saw this they asked, “What is this, father?” The old man said to them, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another?”

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