



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday in Lent – Year C

Go, and sin no more

Readings: Isaiah 43: 16-21, Ps 125, Philippians 3:8-14, John 8:1-1

In the year 2000, accompanied by a press fanfare, the then senior bishop of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, Richard Holloway, retired. Pausing only to qualify for his comfortable Episcopal pension, he confirmed, what many had long suspected, that he had ceased to be a Christian. Time, experience and his own acute intelligence had liberated him from the slavery of belief.

Among the many extraordinary outpourings of this celebrated apostate was a remark he made, in 1995, on the eve of his talks on sex in an Edinburgh church. Holloway casually remarked that God has given us ‘promiscuous genes’ and it would be wrong for the Church to condemn those who follow their instincts. At first hearing I thought perhaps ‘promiscuous jeans’ were a new version of Levis, a new make of tough workman’s trousers that inexorably led the wearer astray or made him irresistible to women.

Holloway, of course, meant that, hardwired into the DNA of many of us was an irresistible concupiscence. We were, so to speak, ‘born to boogie’. It was the long end of his work on ‘Godless Morality’.

Which brings me to the Gospel.

Today's Gospel is generally referred to in shorthand as 'The Woman taken in adultery'. As a Masculinist I prefer to call it, 'The Guilty Men'. Jesus is confronted with a lynch mob.

Now I am not a private detective but my experience is that adulterers are pretty sneaky and you need some planning and organisation to catch them *in flagrante* as the charming old euphemism goes. So this is a carefully orchestrated set-up and, amazingly, only one of the participants in this socially unhealthy activity has been brought to book. Presumably the man was quicker into those promiscuous old jeans and off down the road a piece.

The mood of the crowd is ugly and damnatory. They exhibit all the enthusiasm for sin and other people's failings that regularly fuel the headlines of tabloid newspapers.

What would Jesus do? The law is the law and she is clearly guilty.

We are not dealing here with a society that regards adultery as an understandable hobby but one that regards it as so seriously undermining to the fabric of family and community life that the penalty is death.

Yet it is also a society that knows the judgement of God on its own follies and faithlessness. Time and again the prophets warn Israel that her own infidelities are a kind of adultery against the love of God.

Jesus does not reply. Rather he kneels and writes in the dust. Curious.

Thinking time? Maybe....but not for Jesus. Time for the doomed woman to reflect, yes. But also time for the vindictive self-righteous posse to

examine what they are lusting to do – that is to take a life. Jesus slows the momentum of anger and hatred. But there is more here.

Here, the Word made flesh, the Word who brought all creation into being does what He did at the beginning. He writes in the dust and, from the dust, He creates Man. He reminds them of their origin in much the same way as the dust of Ash Wednesday reminds us of our limitation and mortality. He does not engage in legal dispute. Jesus takes those men back behind the question they are asking to fundamentals.

Stalled and disappointed they regroup and persist with the question. Is she to die or are you a heretic?

Then Jesus utters that amazing challenge. 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.'

And while their anger and righteousness is dissolving in the reality of painful self-examination, Jesus stoops to write again in the dust.

Remember the second time God writes is upon the Tablets of Stone on Mount Sinai when He gives the Law as Israel's lodestone and salvation. This is the Law that Jesus comes to fulfil. Then my favourite bit 'One by one they went away beginning with the eldest'. (Actually the word used is the same word as for priests, 'Elders')

They came as a self-righteous mob. They leave as individuals convicted in their own hearts. The eldest leave first because only the very young or very foolish think they are either immortal or infallible. Age should teach a

little wisdom. The older I get the more I know my own follies and the greater my need of God.

Jesus is left alone with the woman, another typically unRabbinic situation for Our Lord. So Jesus asks for her observation and response. 'Where are they? Has no-one condemned you?' She replies, 'No-one, Lord.' Just two words for the man who has just saved her life. And so very simply she acknowledges Him as Lord.

Jesus does not condemn her either. That is to say that the only One who has authority to judge, God Himself, does not condemn her to die. His mandate to her is simple. You have your life back, 'Go and sin no more'.

Jesus does not say she did not sin or it does not matter. Both Jesus and the woman know how much it matters. It is a matter of life and death. But Jesus is God. He created Man to be in loving relationship with Him. When Man fell He gave Him the Law to help him return to Him. Now He comes Himself to offer Himself for us – His life for ours – and to reveal, what the Code of Canon Law describes as 'the supreme law of the Church' and the one which informs all other laws - that 'is the salvation of souls.'