



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Lent Year C

The women taken in adultery

Readings: *Isaiah 43: 16-21, Ps 126, Phil 3: 8-14, John 8: 1-11*

The story of the woman ‘taken in adultery’ touches a raw nerve in most of us. We are conscious, the older we get, of the manifold complications and temptations to which our fragile humanity is heir. But, with Jesus, we hold the line. It is a sin.

We may have our judgement constrained by circumstance but not essentially altered. We, in the liberal West, think of adultery as freely entered into disobedience driven by carelessness or lust or simple ill discipline and physical proximity. But, for example... what of the young woman condemned to a wretched marriage to a prosperous geriatric by familial contract in a land whose culture is dominated by a toxic masculinity? The victims of mental and physical cruelty in supposedly more advanced cultures?

We do not always know the prevailing circumstance which leads to the, all too often, destructive lapse.

In a society which handsomely elects a past master of serial infidelity and whose leading media ‘go-to’ (and inaccurate) pandemic statistician can boast that his failure to keep social distance from his mistress was OK because she was in an ‘open marriage’, we are perhaps beyond surprise.

Nevertheless the truth remains that for most normal people, whose conscience has not been utterly eroded by the promiscuity of the culture, adultery is a 'deal breaker' in a marriage. Having said that, I have known remarkably good marriages rebuilt from the apparent ruins and, with forgiveness and mutual reconciliation, go the full distance to the tomb.

But for most people, the betrayal at the very heart of their intimacy is a bridge that they cannot or will not mend. So, this woman, in the story today, has, for whatever reason, in the eyes of her society, attacked the very core of family life and fidelity. Her action (and that of the curiously absent fellow transgressor) has gnawed at the very bonds of trust by which we hold together.

It is no accident that, in Holy Scripture, the most common image of God's relationship with His people is that of a Marriage and that God's experience of that sacred bond is one of almost constant and casual betrayal by the beloved – that is to say, us. The most powerful and painful description of the pain of our infidelity is in the book of the prophet Hosea.

So here we are, sitting with Jesus in the Temple, after a dawn quiet reflection time on the peaceful Mount of Olives, observing the bustle of Jerusalem, when an urgent and excited crowd appearing dragging this 'slut' to the new and provocative Rabbi for judgement. Will he back Moses or show Himself to be a heretic? Stones in hand they wait with scarcely disguised enthusiasm and blood lust for His verdict. Either way, trust me, she is going to be stoned!

Jesus does not respond. Rather He waits for the incensed tide of boiling rage to lose its immediate momentum. A rush to judgement is seldom a recipe for justice. Then He kneels and starts doodling in the dust. This is the very same dust from which the Word Himself, now incarnate, created Man. It is the same dust to which all of those assembled, and all before or since, will return. Only then does The Word speak. And we know what He says..... it echoes throughout our spiritual history. He invites every one of us to make the judgement. Of course our sins, for the most part, are private, unseen, hard to prove by any would be accuser. We can deceive the world – even ourselves - but not God. Being caught in the act of adultery is a little harder to ‘finesse’. ‘Deniability’ is not an option. ‘Josiah and I only took our clothes off because it was so unbearably hot in the gym’ is unlikely to cut the mustard here.

Before we pass final and life denying judgement on our fellow man, Jesus simply invites us to look in the mirror. He does not commend sin, that of the adulteress or ours. He does not diminish the pain and anguish of her or our infidelities but He does insist that we confront them.

John’s Gospel then records simply:

‘They went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest.’ A beautiful touch. While the young guys may think they are immortal and be less self- critical, the old guys know that Jesus has got us ‘bang to rights’.

Then, looking up from his patient drawing in the dust, Jesus observes that He and the ‘loose’ woman are alone. ‘Did no-one condemn you?’ asks the only one whose judgement will matter eternally. The only one in a position to cast the first lethal stone.

Jesus is in no doubt of the magnitude of the sin – or that sin is sin and truly deserves punishment. After all the cost of those sins will be borne by Him very shortly on the Cross of nearby Calvary, carried there on a wave of resentment from the same bloodthirsty, self-righteous crew whose morning entertainment He has just thwarted. His instruction to this fallen and reprieved daughter of Eve is the same as to us as we leave the confessional – our secret infidelities unburdened, our lives given back to us. Mortal sin is just that – lethal. So... ‘Go and sin no more’.

This morning, after Mass, our first communion children will be bravely stepping up to the mark and getting real with God. The best way that we can support our children is by example. For everyone there will be opportunity on.....

For parents here today , Fr Ciaran, Fr Jacek and I are in no hurryso come and make your confession too.

Then together we can walk into the new dawn of Christ’s absolution, penitent, restored, grateful and determined to be faithful to Him.

And...a little spiritual exercise.... If there is someone who has been under your judgement.....take a large stone in your hand and pray for them. Then, when you are ready, put it down and walk away.