

MEETING THE MERCIFUL JESUS: 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT C

The story is told of a young French soldier who deserted Napoleon's army. Within a couple of hours he was caught by his own troops. The penalty for desertion was death. The mother of the young soldier heard what was happening and went to plead with Napoleon to spare the life of her son. Napoleon heard her out but pointed out that because of the serious nature of his crime her son did not deserve mercy. *'I know he doesn't deserve mercy,'* the mother answered. *'It wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it.'* She was right. Mercy is not justice. It's pure gift, grace and graciousness, in imitation of God.

We hear in our gospel today a story about the mercy of Jesus. It illustrates his teaching: *'Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven'* (Lk 6:6-37). A married woman has been found in bed with another man. At once she is treated like dirt. First, she is thrown out of her house. Then there is talk of hitting her with the full force of the Law, death by stoning (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:23-24). Next she is hustled to some Pharisees, the defenders of the Law. They decide to hustle her to Jesus. For if they can get away with it, they will try to hurt Jesus as well as the woman: *'Master,'* they say pompously, *'this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have you to say?'*

They present Jesus with a dilemma. On the one hand, if he defends her they will accuse him of contempt for the Law of Moses. If, on the other hand, he condemns her, that's the end of his reputation for mercy and leniency towards sinners. His enemies have placed him in a seemingly *'no-win'* situation.

Jesus admits that she has sinned, but he does not condemn her, for he has come to seek and save the lost. He does so in a stunning way. While admitting that the woman has indeed sinned, he also knows that in different ways her accusers are sinners too. So he answers with this challenge: *'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.'* His brilliant reply rules out any condemnation of the woman, even by the most zealous follower of the Law. For who would dare to claim: *'I am totally sinless, I am completely blameless, and so I'm entitled to throw stones?'*

His enemies are forced by the words of Jesus to drop the stones from their hands and to slink off one by one. So the poor sinner is left alone with the Sinless one. St Augustine comments: *'There they were together, great misery, on the one hand, and, great mercy, on the other.'*

As for the woman, she is not abandoned to her fate. Jesus is more concerned for her future than her past. His concern is to show her how much God loves her in her predicament. So he invites her to put the past behind her and make a brand new start. *'Neither do I condemn you,'* says Jesus, *'go away and from this moment sin no more.'*

These are liberating words, liberating words indeed, words which not only set the woman free from the harshness and hard-heartedness of her accusers, but also from her own feelings of shame, guilt, self-loathing and despair! The promise of God in the First Reading has come true: *'No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing*

a new deed.' And so, if we too have sinned but repented we have before God no evil past any longer. Having come back to God with all our hearts, we are new men and new women in a new world, and can therefore praise God in the words of today's psalm: *'The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.'*

This true story challenges our tendency to divide the people around us into them and us, and into good ones and bad ones. We might suppose that the good ones are those we belong to, and the bad ones are those they belong to. But that line is a lie. No one is perfect. In different ways we are all sinners. So a wise saying has it: *'There's bad in the best of us, and good in the worst of us. So it makes no sense for any of us, to talk about the rest of us.'*

So, *'what we need to heap up in our own hearts and in our church is compassion that heals, not stones that hurt'* (Verna Holyhead). As part of the process of our conversion in Lent, then, we might ask ourselves today: Do we want to be like Jesus or like the religious leaders of his time? More specifically, if we are ready to accept the understanding and forgiveness of God for ourselves, must we not be ready to understand and forgive others? Don't we just need to drop our grudges against others once and for all, let bygones be bygones, and move on?

In preparing for Holy Communion today we will be saying to God our Father, *'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'* And in the Sign of Peace we will be exchanging the sign of a loving heart, which includes the desire and intention to forgive. May we say what we mean and mean what we say!

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