

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21

Ps 125

Philippians 3:8-14

John 8:1-11

In today's Gospel, Jesus is brought face-to-face with a woman caught in the act of adultery. Presumably there was a man with her too—I mean, that's how these things tend to go—but we're not told anything about him, which perhaps says something about the woman's accusers. I suppose it's possible the man was able to get away before he was caught, although it might also be possible that he's managed to parlay anger at the woman into getting himself off the hook. This was a long time before "MeToo" after all. Anyway, the scribes and Pharisees use this woman to set a not-so-subtle trap for Jesus. In a sense they're using the woman just as much as her fellow-adulterer did. According to the Law of Moses, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning, and the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus what he thinks of this.

Now, we can safely presume that the gathered crowd has been whipped up into the kind of frenzy that tends to precede such acts of collective violence. In other words, a mob mentality has begun take hold. And the thing about mobs is that they're easy to get swept up into – because when you're part of a mob, it doesn't *seem* like you're part of a mob. What it seems like is that you're taking part in a collective act of justice. Only those with some space from it all can see that it's actually scapegoating more than justice.

And should you have the grace to avoid being swept up in a mob when you're near one, it's almost impossible to stop or influence the mob until their collective lust for violence has been satisfied. Logic is thrown out the window. It's almost like they're under a spell. And, any attempts at quelling the mob's righteous anger runs the risk of making oneself the new target of its anger.

So Jesus finds himself in quite the pickle. On the one hand, it's clear he wants to save the woman from being stoned. And yet, if he contradicts the Mosaic Law to save the woman—as the scribes and Pharisees no doubt suspect he might—then he risks taking her place as the target of the mob's fury. It's a precarious situation Jesus finds himself in. If he says "yes", they will stone the woman; if he says "no" they will probably stone *him*. Either way there will be bloodshed.

And so, in response to their question, Jesus does something unexpected: he bends down and starts writing on the ground. No-one knows what he wrote, and if we really needed to know the Gospels no doubt would have shared it with us. However, whatever he wrote on the ground, this gesture has a fascinating effect. It essentially lowers the temperature, interrupting the social momentum of the mob. Jesus knows that he's been handed a rigged situation, and he will not be forced into playing their

game. Instead, he takes his time, and rather than respond directly, performs this unexpected gesture.

It's as though he is giving the accusers space to notice what's really going on. However, the gathered crowd continues to press him for an answer. And so eventually he offers the famous line that has reverberated down the centuries: "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone."

Now note: these words aren't an attack against the accusers. Jesus is seeking to get them to come to their senses. In a real sense, he is *as* concerned for the accusers as he is for the woman – he wants to break through their hardened hearts. And so in this response, Jesus is not only reframing the terms and thus avoiding the trap that's been set for him... he's also throwing the accusers a lifeline.

And then the most amazing thing happens. The spell is broken. One-by-one the crowd departs, beginning with the eldest. *One by one* they regain their individuality – they're no longer some anonymous collective, but real people with agency and responsibility. Being the first to walk away from a mob—owning what you've become—takes more courage than being the second or third or fifteenth to walk away, so it's not surprising that it begins with the eldest. For if the eldest man had any degree of honest self-knowledge or wisdom, he would have had a good idea of just how far from "being without sin" he'd actually been over the course of his life.

And so the crowd eventually disperses, after which Jesus is left with the accused woman. Now note, he doesn't begin by lecturing her on morality. He begins by saying to her what she most needs to hear: "I do not condemn you." And with this being established, she is now able to hear his next line, "Go and sin no more."

This is important. Some folks jump straight to the repudiation of sin before establishing a relationship with people and affirming the Lord's offer of mercy. Such an approach is unlikely to be received well. On the other hand, other folks act as though Jesus essentially said that the woman's sin was no big deal, neglecting the fact that this is precisely what the Pharisees were trying to get him to say and he specifically avoided it. Both mercy and justice are important, and Jesus represents both here. As the saying goes: "Love the sinner, hate the sin."

In our first reading from the prophet Isaiah, we heard the line: "See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?" And indeed, in the Person of Jesus, God brought forth something breath-takingly new into the world. The same old cycle of sin and death has forever been undone, and the exhilarating light of forgiveness and new life has broken into the world.

Most of us would take sides in the drama of today's Gospel – either the "right wing" position of maintaining order and punishing the adulterous woman, or the "left wing" position of defending the woman and taking on the social system. Jesus, however, does not take sides. He seeks the conversion of both the woman and her accusers. He

has come to invite us *all* into union with the Father, and he is not confined by our ideological limitations.

Throughout Lent, we are brought face-to-face with our *own* propensity for sin. But, like the woman in the Gospel, we are also assured that Jesus loves us, and does not condemn us. Reflecting on the depth of Christ's love for us—shown most clearly in his death on the Cross—we are asked to respond by striving to sin no more, knowing that sin only impedes the fullness of life that Christ came to offer us. As Saint Paul says in our second reading, “I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him.”

So in today's Eucharist, let us rest in the presence of Christ, and allow his grace to transform us from the inside, that we too may be instruments of his perfect justice and mercy in our confused and hurting world.