

5th Sunday of Lent C: Isaiah 43:16-21; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11

In the Gospel today, Jesus shows gentleness and compassion for the woman who has been caught in adultery. As he sends her away without condemnation, he pleads with her to sin no more. Jesus does not condemn us despite our sinfulness but invites us to conversion. As we call to mind our sins, let us remember especially the harsh and unfair judgments we sometimes pass on to others. Let us ask God for forgiveness so that we can celebrate this Mass worthily. Homily Newspaper editors of particular kinds understand well that scandals whether social, economic or political, sells newspapers. In fact, they make news. If you think about the various public scandals in this country or even abroad and the kind of attention or news they made, you will understand what I am saying. There is something rather sad in human nature which delights to read about the individual who has fallen from grace or who has ruined his/her life. This instinct was very much alive and kicking in the first century Palestine. The scene that John gives is remarkable in the sense that it took place at dawn. We all know it takes two to tango, and yet it was the woman that was being throttled and harassed. The scene is underpinned by menace wickedness which makes the offence appear minor even by comparison.

We see God's love and compassion in Jesus' treatment of the sinful woman. As we go on in life we tend to set a higher value on the virtue of kindness, plain, ordinary, everyday kindness. When we look back on our lives, we remember with regret acts of unkindness. But we recall fondly times when we acted kindly. Kindness is essential to true justice. Jesus was especially kind to individuals whom he was called to judge. The classic example is the woman caught in adultery. The story warns us against being too quick to take the high moral grounds. Which of us is without sin? We must learn from the example of Jesus. He condemned the woman's sin, but refused to condemn her. It is not that sin didn't matter to him. It did. But he distinguished between the sinner and the sin. He condemned the sin but pardoned the sinner. And his overriding motive in all of this was compassion. It wasn't a question of being liberal [anything goes] but of being compassionate. The holier a person is, the less he/she is inclined to judge others. In every human being, here is a dimension which escapes the power of judgment of other human beings. The compassion and forgiveness of Jesus give life. The woman went away free, free to change her behavior and to regain her self-respect. Jesus reminds us that people are capable of changing if given the chance. The mission of the Church

is to be a place of forgiveness and reconciliation, so that all of us who fail at different times and in different contexts may experience the love, compassion and forgiveness of God. The Bishop Fulton Sheen of blessed memory once said to inmates of a prison during his usual Christmas visit, 'we are all thieves, the only different between you and I is that you have been caught and perhaps convicted but I have not been caught'. The Church is a community of grace, a community of love who does not condemn but are concerned about mercy rather than sacrifice or justice as such. This coming Tuesday after palm Sunday affords another great opportunity to renew ourselves in the sacrament of reconciliation or confession. Please I appeal that we avail ourselves of that great opportunity for self-renewal. I understand the difficulties of sitting beside a Priest to talk about oneself in such an apparently humiliating way, but that is what our religion is all about. It is about humility. It is about doing what the church inspired by the Holy Spirit thinks are good form our spiritual growth and being in the state of grace. Those things are often difficult but very gracious and efficacious.

One day a mother came to plead with Napoleon Bona Parte for her son's life. The Youngman had committed a very serious offence. The law was clear. Justice demanded his death. The emperor was determined to ensure that justice was done. But the mother insisted, your excellence, I have come to ask for mercy not for justice. But he does not deserve mercy, the emperor answered. Your excellence, it would not be mercy if he deserved it. So be it, said Napoleon. I will have mercy on him. And he was true to his word. He set the Youngman free. Mercy of its nature is pure gift, unmerited. It something we stand in need of all the time. Therefore, it is something we must extend to other people, no matter the situation. Remember the holy writ, blessed are the merciful for they shall have mercy shown them.

Rolan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury in his book, Open to judgment, published by Darton and Longman Todd, reflects: Our sins become not stopping points, but starting points. They can be occasions of constantly fresh, constantly wider visions of the grace of God. It's often been said that the saints in heaven rejoice over their sins because through them, they have been brought to greater understanding of the endless endurance of God's love and to the knowledge that beyond every failure, God's creative mercy still waits. We have a future because of this grace.