

## Lent Fifth Sunday Homily



There's something about human beings that loves a bit of crowd action. The emotion of being together for a common purpose. You can see this at football games, the Queen's Jubilee, (my days of Anti-National Front and anti-Murdoch demos back in the day,) and then possibly less positively depending on where you stand, waving soldiers off to war. The negative side of this is that it doesn't take much for the crowd to be whipped up by a demagogue, as in Germany in the 30s, or media influence, to go on the hunt for other humans. The crowd becomes infected with a sort of perverted 'righteous indignation' that leads to the reverse of humane action. In fact the crowd loses the humanity that many within it on their own would normally have expressed. We get carried away. Crowds, which rapidly become mobs, are dangerous. At the end of 'Oliver,' after the death of Nancy, the hue and cry is raised, and the mob set off after Bill Sykes, hunting him down into dockland where he eventually falls to his death. The lynch mob at the beginning of To Kill a Mockingbird seek the death of an innocent man.

So in our gospel today the crowd, filled with that so-called 'righteous indignation,' are dragging the woman through the streets. It says she has been caught in the act of adultery and so the Law says she has to be stoned to death. Nothing is good in this picture. From our modern point of view we would condemn the Law's demand for death, and the imbalance of the Law against the woman and not the man, but even then, where is the justice? And who is plotting so that she is brought before Jesus? There is no reason to involve him. There is someone's devilry behind it all.

In Jesus' eyes all the people before him show some of the worst aspects of humanity when goodness is twisted. That the woman has sinned the story accepts. But it is the crowd that worries Jesus most. In its assault of the woman's dignity, dragging her through the streets, but also their own loss of dignity in their inhumane action and their loss of compassion, the loss of all that is good in humanity, and our ability to twist for example here the Law, a good thing, in order to do a bad one. Evil perverts the good for its own subversive purposes.

One writer says: Three trials are taking place here. (Trials, encounters, are important to John as they debate good and bad. On Good Friday we will come to the trial of Jesus and the Good will be revealed in that. The contrast in a trial of one versus the other, good versus bad, reveals the innocence of Jesus and the negative forces set against him.) So, the trial of the woman, should she be stoned?; the trial of Jesus, can these men discredit him?; the trial of the crowd, are they acting out of guilt or fear? Why fear? Who is afraid? Certainly the

Jewish leaders who fear the power of Jesus among the people and his challenge to their position. But in a more general way Jesus seems to be challenging the heart of Jewish life and its customs. So it is the Law they invoke in condemning the woman. Are you with us in our way of life or not?

Now Jesus silence is telling. Much like the judge before he or she gives sentence. (Even modern cooking shows have a great pause, often too long, before the judgement is given.) Jesus is the judge here and he is well aware of everything that is going on around him. The woman he will come to later. But it is the crowd that concern him most, and not from fear for his own life, but for their spiritual life. For the perversion of their humanity. How does he speak to the heart of each one of them rather than the crowd? So he addresses his question in this way: "Whoever among you who is without sin, let him (an individual) cast the first stone." So the crowd pauses. The crowd itself is silenced as it finds the heart of each one of them being spoken to. From an angry mass they become a reflective set of individuals as if waking up from a dream. Perhaps the first thought is: "What am I doing here?" So each one is released from the mob and drifts away.

The Greek word for 'forgiveness' also means 'to release.' Jesus is setting them free from the mob and at the same time opening them up to forgiveness.

With the woman, she is physically held, stripped, humiliated by the men and possibly scorned by many of the women she is dragged past as well. She also knows that she has sinned and what the punishment is. So she expects the usual judgement, and would expect no other from a wise man like Jesus. But it is always Jesus' way to heal, forgive, and return us to true life where he can.

What is his sacrifice on the cross, his great act of love, but an act of healing and salvation for those who have so often lost their true humanity, that which we were given when we were created, and often as yet failed to realise or understand our need for forgiveness. It is act out of hope in us rather than an answer to a demand. The mass of humanity, the crowd if you like, were not begging for forgiveness when Jesus died. We could not see it. But he acted knowing our need and hoping that we would see it too in due course. Opening the way for us to discover our true human selves. Both the crowd, as individuals, and the woman, go off after their encounter with him, completely changed. Certainly the woman. Now free of condemnation. For those in the crowd perhaps less clearly so, but they are now in a place where they have had to think about how they live their lives. As soon as that space is opened up, there is a chance we will reflect and change. And the Church gives us that space in Lent. In a week's time we will be listening to the Passion according to Luke and then in two weeks on Good Friday that of John. In both Jesus' hope is that in sharing in his story, we will see that he has opened the door for us and choose to take a step further on our journey to eternal life.