

GOSPEL

JOHN 8:1-11

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

The Gospel of the Lord.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is your attitude towards those who are obviously ‘in the wrong’? With whom would you be standing if placed in the scene above – why?
2. How does Jesus’ response make you feel – towards others’ sin, and towards you own sin?
3. What might Jesus be encouraging you to think and act in response to this story?

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

The Gospel of this Fifth Sunday of Lent is so beautiful, I really enjoy reading and rereading it. It presents the episode of the adulterous woman, highlighting the theme of the mercy of God, who never wants the sinner to die, but that the sinner convert

and live. The scene unfolds on the Temple grounds. Imagine this scene happening in front of your church building. Jesus is teaching the people, when several scribes and Pharisees arrive, dragging before him a woman caught in adultery. That woman is thus placed between Jesus and the crowd, between the mercy of the Son of God and the violence and anger of her accusers. In fact, they did not come to the Teacher to ask his opinion — they were bad people — but to ensnare him. Indeed, were Jesus to follow the stringent law, approving that the woman be stoned, he would lose his reputation of meekness and goodness which so fascinated the people; however, were he to be merciful, he would be flouting the law, which he himself said he did not wish to abolish but fulfil. This is the situation Jesus is placed in.

This wicked intention was hidden behind the question that they asked Jesus: “What do you say about her?”. Jesus did not respond; he kept silent and made a mysterious gesture: he “bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground”. Perhaps he was drawing, some said that he wrote down the sins of the Pharisees... however, he was writing, as if he were elsewhere. In this way he helped everyone to calm down, not to act on the wave of impulsiveness, and to seek the justice of God. But those wicked men persisted and waited for him to answer. They seemed to thirst for blood. Then Jesus looked up and said: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her”. This response confounded the accusers, disarming all of them in the true sense of the word: they all lay down their “weapons”, that is, the stones ready to be thrown, both the visible ones against the woman and those concealed against Jesus. While the Lord continued to write on the ground, to draw, I don’t know.... The accusers went away, one after the other, heads down, beginning with the eldest, most aware of not being without sin. How much good it does us to be aware that we too are sinners! When we speak ill of others — something we know well — how much good it will do us to have the courage to drop down the stones we have to throw at others, and to think a little about our own sins!

Only the woman and Jesus remained: misery and mercy. How often does this happen to us when we stop before

the confessional, with shame, to show our misery and ask for forgiveness! “Woman, where are they?”, Jesus said to her. This question is enough, and his merciful gaze, full of love, in order to let that person feel — perhaps for the first time — that she has dignity, that she is not her sin, she has personal dignity; that she can change her life, she can emerge from her slavery and walk on a new path.

Dear brothers and sisters, that woman represents all of us. We are sinners, meaning adulterers before God, betrayers of his fidelity. Her experience represents God’s will for each of us: not our condemnation but our salvation through Jesus. He is the grace which saves from sin and from death. On the ground, in the dust of which every human being is made, he wrote God’s sentence: “I want not that you die but that you live”. God does not nail us to our sin, he does not identify us by the evil we have committed. We have a name, and God does not identify this name with the sin we have committed. He wants to free us, and wants that we too want it together with him. He wants us to be free to convert from evil to good, and this is possible — it is possible! — with his grace.

REFLECTION QUESTION

- What has struck you from this reflection by the Holy Father?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God
4. Prayer for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.