

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.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, the liturgy presents us the episode of the adulterous woman. In it, there are two contrasting attitudes: that of the scribes and the Pharisees on the one hand, and that of Jesus on the other. The former want to condemn the woman because they feel they are the guardians of the Law and of its faithful implementation. Jesus, on the other hand, wants to save her because he personifies God’s mercy which redeems by forgiving and renews by reconciling.

Let us thus look at the event. While Jesus is teaching in the Temple, the scribes and the Pharisees bring him a woman who has been caught in adultery. They place her in the middle and ask Jesus if they should stone her as the Law of Moses prescribes. The Evangelist explains that they asked the question in

order “to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him”. One might think that this was their purpose: behold the iniquity of these people — a ‘no’ to the stoning would have been a pretext to accuse Jesus of disobeying the Law; a ‘yes’ instead, to report him to the Roman Authority which had reserved such sentences to itself and did not permit lynching by the people. And Jesus must respond.

Jesus’ interrogators are confined to narrow legalism and want to oblige the Son of God to conform to their perspective of judgment and condemnation. However, he did not come into the world to judge and condemn, but rather to save and offer people a new life. And how does Jesus react to this test? First of all, he remains silent for some time and then he bends down to write on the ground with his finger, almost as if to remind them that the only Legislator and Judge is God who had inscribed the Law on stone. And then he says: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her”. In this way, Jesus appeals to the conscience of those men: they felt they were the ‘champions of justice’, but he reminds them of their own condition as sinners, due to which they cannot claim the right to life or death over one of their fellow human beings. At that point, one after the other, beginning with the eldest — that is, those who were more fully aware of their own failings — they all went away, and desisted from stoning the woman.

This episode also invites each of us to be aware that we are sinners, and to let fall from our hands the stones of denigration, of condemnation, of gossip, which at times we would like to cast at others. When we speak ill of others, we are throwing stones, we are like these people.

And in the end only Jesus and the woman are left there in the middle: “misery with mercy”, as Saint Augustine says. Jesus is the only one without fault, the only one who could throw a stone at her, but he does not do so, because God “does not want the death of the wicked but that the wicked convert and live” (cf. Ez 33:11). And Jesus sends the woman on her way with these wonderful words: “Go and do not sin again”. And thus Jesus opens a new path to her, created by mercy, a path that

requires her commitment not to sin again. It is an invitation that applies to each one of us. When Jesus forgives us, he always opens a new path on which to go forward. In this Lenten Season, we are called to recognize ourselves as sinners and to ask God for forgiveness. And, in its turn, while forgiveness reconciles us and gives us peace, it lets us start again, renewed. Every true conversion is oriented toward a new future, a new life, a beautiful life, a life free from sin, a generous life. Let us not be afraid to ask Jesus for forgiveness because he opens the door to this new life for us. May the Virgin Mary help us to bear witness to all of the merciful love of God, who through Jesus, forgives us and renders our lives new, by always offering us new possibilities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 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?
- How does Jesus’ response make you feel – towards others’ sin, and towards your own sin?
- What might Jesus be encouraging you to think and act in response to this story?

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. Pray 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.