

5th SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR C HOMILY 2022
EVEN MORE FORGIVENESS, MERCY AND LOVE FOR A SINNER OR MORE!

Jn 8.1-11 Is 43.16-21 Phil 13.8-14

This week we celebrated a Reconciliation Liturgy with 90 or so of our young people from St Therese's Primary School and other local schools, following up with a one to one encounter with me as priest to give absolution. I was amused by one candidate who repeated after me, and went on to suggest I think of something I was sorry for or could have done better, or where I could have been more thoughtful at home or at school!! At age 8 or 9, I think it is not a bad time, to highlight a growing awareness of our capacity to make bad choices, or do the wrong thing, and the need to say sorry, but also to realize God's forgiveness is always there.

We used last week's family story, the Gospel multi-faceted story of forgiveness of the naughty boy, the generous forgiving father and miffed and angry big brother, to all of whom we can relate in one way or another.

There's not much new here this week, as this is one of the key stories we well know, emphasizing his compassion, along with the scathing criticism by Jesus, of the would be self-righteous and judgemental stone throwers. His concluding line has gone into our lexicon, as we often enough hear the line: ***"Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone."*** Australian author Helen Garner titled one of her novels ***The First Stone***, which raised questions about sex and power, relating to a 1992 sexual harassment scandal at a university college. Such issues don't go away, as the more recent ***MeToo#*** movement reflects, in some ways, and women's issues raised, close to home in our own society, in recent times.

One interesting aspect is the way in which, throughout human history, a double standard seems to apply when it comes to the tendency and even tradition of blaming females for being the cause of the problems, when it comes to being the temptress, leading the man astray, from the mythological ***Adam*** into temptation and sin, such that he only takes the naughty bite of the apple, or whatever forbidden fruit you prefer, at the enticement of ***Eve***.

The older I've got, the more I've questioned why it is the woman in today's story who cops the blame and then the intended stoning. Where is the man who was equally as blameworthy, surely, and why is he not part of this scenario? At least, in Jesus' pronouncements on marriage, he mentions both as equally implicated, in regard to adultery.

There is a horrific but true graphic account of a stoning in Khaled Hosseini's autobiographical book, ***The Kite Runner***, based in Afghanistan, where, in the 1980's, the Taliban carry out a stoning of an allegedly adulterous couple as half-time entertainment in a stadium at a soccer game, on the pretext it was all ***God's will!*** It's just a reminder of the brutality, injustice and evil, of such a punishment, and playing to the bloodlust of the crowd, presumably all male.

And now, we've jumped from the Gospel of Luke (whose year it is) to John today, it being suggested because this story was only squeezed in during the 3rd century, and is more akin to Luke's style, when it comes to Jesus' counter-cultural relationship with women, particularly women in trouble, be it sick or sinful or in grief, when we think about it.

One possibility is that this account floated around in oral tradition, but was originally excluded from the Gospels, because the early church was rather tough on certain sins, with a policy of ***one strike and you're out***, with permanent exclusion or excommunication imposed, when it came to murder, adultery or apostasy, the last being to deny one's Christian faith. (*One reason why 4th century Constantine was only baptized on his deathbed, as he knew, as Roman emperor, he couldn't or wouldn't, avoid some of the more serious sinful stuff along the way!*).

And then there were the penances handed out for other serious sins, with the sackcloth and ashes being a public penalty to self-expose the sinner, before readmission to the faith community. So the deterrents were rather strong and fear and guilt-inducing! We should be thankful the ashes bit was eventually reduced to ashes for all on Ash Wednesday, which remains one of our most popular non-obligatory celebrations to this day. At least the 8th century Irish monks later alleviated things, with private and confidential, one to one, confession and penance.

In conclusion, after challenging the poor woman's accusers to have a good look at themselves, as we should too, and their own motives, inadequacies and sins, Jesus' final words to the forgiven woman apply to us also: "*Neither do I condemn you. Go away and do not sin any more.*" as we keep trying to be his faithful followers, sin again as we may or will!

In this context, then, a reminder to all that our parish penitential rite will be celebrated here on Wednesday evening at 7pm next week.

And now, we have a further reminder to contribute to Project Compassion, supporting the work of Caritas Australia. This weekend we hear from Shaniella, and the need for ongoing education and formation of leaders in the Solomon Islands.

(Caritas video).

john hannon

3rd April 2022