

A reflection for Ash Wednesday

Sinner, Judge or Merciful – which are you?

(adapted from a reflection by Bishop Steven Croft -
“A sermon at Ripon College Cuddesdon” accessed 9 Feb
<https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/mercy-and-judgement/>)

(John 7:53, 8:1-11)

***May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts,
be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our strength and our
redeemer. Amen***

This evening, we begin our observance of Lent – a solemn, forty-day season that carries notes of repentance and discipline and yet looks forward to the great celebration of Easter. The liturgical colour of Lent is purple, denoting penance and yet the word Lent derives from the Old English word meaning "spring season". It is known in Eastern Orthodox circles as the season of "bright sadness". We will see that the Gospel reading this evening balances those themes of brightness and sadness.

And we talk of a “Lenten journey” – we are encouraged to engage in self-reflection, simplicity, and sincerity.

Please keep these ideas in mind as we consider the story of the ‘Woman caught in Adultery’ from the Gospel of Saint John this evening.

I'd like to take you on a mental journey in which we will imagine ourselves in four different postures, four different perspectives or seats – four different viewpoints of and in the story. If you are unfamiliar with it, you have it on the pew sheet.

First, as we begin to read the story, let's imagine ourselves as we are – listeners and readers of this story. It is cleverly constructed – we see the trap which the smart scribes and Pharisees try to set for Jesus. Would He align Himself with the harsh Old Testament law and condone the stoning of the woman brought before Him? That would put paid to His reputation as the Gentle Jesus. Or would he contradict the law and expose Himself to criticism that He wasn't obedient to the Jewish traditions that came from God Himself? That would show him up as a fraud, not the Son of God after all ... Looks like "Heads the scribes win, tails Jesus loses": a very clever trap! And we see that, once more, Jesus reasons on a different level – He doesn't play with the rules in the way that the Scribes and Pharisees do, and yet He is much more adept at reading them and applying them with love – for the greater purpose of God's Grace as I have had the opportunity to reflect on previously. We see all this from our comfortable seat as "neutral observers" – the easiest seat we will occupy this evening ... easiest, but maybe one we take too often. It is risk-free and intellectually interesting. But it is also spiritually poor. If self-reflection, simplicity, and sincerity are our objectives this Lent, the position of neutral observer doesn't help much.

So, come with me in your imagination to a different seat. The perspective of the Scribes and Pharisees. We are all upright people. Some of us are good Swiss citizens, naturalized or Swiss by birth. I first heard the phrase "*c'est la loi, Monsieur*" when I came to

Switzerland ... it isn't just in caricatures that we like rules in Switzerland! We can easily see ourselves in the Scribes' seat ... Rules are of course important, and they must be enforced. But I think, if we are honest, like the Scribes and the Pharisees we can also imagine ourselves enforcing rules without love. Which we are all the more inclined to do when it suits our own agendas or desires ... The Scribes and the Pharisees are shown at their most unattractive in this story. They are cruel, harsh, and judgemental. They publicly shame the woman, they display her as an object for spectacle and scrutiny for their own ends. She is collateral damage in the war they are waging against Jesus the trouble-maker. In the name of purity and holiness (and with a dose of self-interest), they enforce the rules and forget love and mercy. As we might also do if we are not careful: we are meant to recognise ourselves in the scribes and Pharisees. Our worst selves, of course. The part of us which enjoys judging others. Especially those we don't much like. The part of us which listens to rumour and gossip. The part of us which seeks the high ground, the superior place, from which to rain down rocks on others.

If self-reflection is one of our objectives this Lent, then we should start by taking an unflinching look in the mirror. It will show us that each of us has an inner Pharisee where our unchecked zeal for the rules has heavy consequences in the lives of others.

[pause]

Maybe it will help if we move seats again – let me take you in your imagination to the next perspective – that of the woman caught red-handed in adultery. I don't suppose that we are all adulterers here this evening, but I'm pretty confident that none of us can say that he or she is without sin, even if we obfuscate and minimise to spare our own blushes. Occupy that seat for a moment and reflect on what act or part of your behaviour might separate you from what God wants for you.

Imagine now if that deepest secret were exposed to all. Imagine your shame in the bright light of day, imagine being dragged to a judge for all to see, having rightful accusations shouted at you and scorn poured on you ... And imagine knowing that you face the death sentence – not a “humane” death sentence, if such a thing exists, but death by public stoning. The most hideous punishment for the offence that you have indeed committed.

If sincerity and honesty before God is one of our objectives this Lent, this seat is uncomfortably helpful ...

We are the woman, taken in sin. Like her, we are deeply uncomfortable in the light of day. Having been exposed, she would have been ashamed and terrified, as we are. If her adultery seemed like a good idea at first, as our sins often do too, she now saw all too clearly the wrong turnings, as we must.

And at the hands of those who judge, she and we can expect nothing but condemnation, injury and death.

We are all ready to say “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

[pause]

So come with me now in your imagination to the final seat in our story – the perspective of Jesus, God incarnate. Fully God yet fully human.

In the story this evening, Jesus, the God of Grace, the God of Mercy, is sitting in the temple. He occupies the true seat of judgement as priest and king. He could judge. If we are honest, we expect Him to judge ... maybe we think He should judge the woman and us.

And yet God consistently upends our expectations. One of the central tasks of Lent is to re-place mercy - rather than judgement - at the heart of our understanding of God. It is all too easy to live with an image of God who is like the Pharisees: who is cold and distant and far more ready to condemn than to forgive. Yet just look at Jesus in this story – he is asked to judge an open and shut case of sin, and yet he crouches in the dust, silent - I think he was doodling in the sand. He challenges everyone – not just those who know they have sinned, but also – maybe especially – those who judge, those who point, those who don't love.

This Jesus is the son of God, sent to us as a human, to show us the way. That is why, if we dare, we are to sit in His seat just for a moment. It is not about being right, it is about showing love and mercy above all.

Remember what the prophet Micah taught:

“what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

No mention of rules or of being right.

In our reading this evening Jesus takes the woman, the scribes, and us all on a journey. The woman’s journey is to move from the shame she feels in her actions to new beginnings, from the harsh gaze of the Pharisees to the gentle gaze of Jesus, from the violent condemnation of the scribes to the silence and stillness of the Saviour, from death and judgement to new life and new beginnings. The Pharisees move from the safety of being in the righteous crowd looking down on others to the self-realisation that they too need God’s mercy.

We started this evening sitting as safe, neutral observers. We took a turn in the seat which is uncomfortably familiar, that of harsh judgement. What that great theologian Taylor Swift calls being “*casually cruel in the name of being honest*”. We moved to the terrifying seat of the rightfully accused, our sins brought out into the harsh light of day.

And we ended taking a turn, if we dared, in the Mercy Seat of Christ.

Faced with that radical mercy, we hear the accusers turn away one by one, dropping the stones they have brought in to throw at us and the whole world. And we hear Jesus’ words to the woman caught in adultery and to each of us:

‘Neither do I condemn you’. ‘Neither do I condemn you’. ‘Go on your way and from now on do not sin again’.

The sin is acknowledged – it isn’t brushed away. But mercy has prevailed over judgement. This is the nature of the God we are preparing to meet as we engage in self-reflection, simplicity, and sincerity on our journey through Lent. He is the God for the weak and despised. The God who subverts. The God who sees our sins and yet forgives us. We are released from our compulsive need to condemn and judge others and we are set free to love. We are called to be stone-catchers and not stone-throwers¹. We are released from our shame and guilt and we are set free to live. We are called to holiness and to share His work of mercy.

“Blessed are the merciful”, says Jesus, “for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5.7).

Amen

¹ Bryan Stevenson, in the pod-cast « Everything happens” with Kate Bowler