

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
3rd April 2022 - 5th Sunday of Lent Laetare Sunday

Readings (Year C): 1st: Isaiah 43:16-21. 13-15. Psalm: 125. 2nd: Philippians 3:8-14. Gospel: John 8:1-11.

Sex grabs our attention. It also sells most things: magazines, newspapers, cars, boats, jewellery, bras – you name it; sexual imagery is used to promote it and persuade us to buy it. And it's not just aimed at men, but at both sexes. Sexuality plays an integral part of life. But the idea of the religious prude is firmly stuck in literature and culture.

It is hard to find in the New Testament a more touching scene than today's gospel: the sinful woman caught face-to-face with the sinless Christ. It is full of questions: questions explicitly asked and questions that hover silently over the story.

If the woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, where was the man? Why wasn't he captured? Did he run or did they let him go? Is the adultery really at the heart of the matter – or is the woman just an easy target for the Pharisees setting a trap for Jesus? They loved to put Jesus in a no-win position.

Either way they think they can trap him. If he lets her go, he would be disobeying the Law of Moses. If he says yes, stone her, he would upset the Roman occupiers who claimed sole right to execute. In her shame and naked vulnerability she is paraded through the streets and brought to Jesus. How will he react?

As is characteristic of Jesus, he turns the tables on them. The Pharisees have made the woman the focus of attention, but Jesus makes **them** the focal point of the trial.

The heart of the matter is the hypocrisy of the men and not the sexual transgression of the woman. **“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”** As she stands there in her shame for all the world to see, it is notable that Jesus keeps his head down, writing in the sand.

He doesn't want to add to her shame. Only when they are alone does he look at her. In the end – as St Augustine so beautifully expressed it – **great misery and great mercy are left alone together.**

In a brief conversation, made up of more questions, Jesus and the woman acknowledge that a sin has been committed and the law has been broken, but Jesus does not want the woman to be held hostage by it. **“Neither do I condemn you...go away and don't sin anymore.”** Jesus ministry brings help and healing; liberty, not captivity.

We live at a time when many hidden sins, abuses and injustices of the past are being exposed. Letting out the poison is necessary. It has brought great relief to many people. But it is important for the victims to move from their past in a positive direction. Staying with the injuries of the past is like picking and poking at a scar, thereby preventing any healing.

Our option is not about forgetting the past but about how we deal with it. Do we stay with the negative reactions or do we move positively towards healing and new life?

The gospel shows how compassionate God is towards the sinner. Jesus was/is more eager to restore life than to destroy it. He forgave the sinner, clothed her nakedness with dignity and restored her to the ideal of sinning no more.

Well may we respond **What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed we were glad.**