

Ash Wednesday Reflection 17th February 2021 St John 7.53 – 8.11

In his sermon and reflection last Sunday Philip cunningly spliced the theme of love for a sweetheart on St Valentine's day with love for our home planet, earth. He encouraged us, in the face of what may seem an impossible task, with global problems including climate change, to take Jesus' parable of the mustard seed as our guide. This tells us not to be put off if our beginnings are small because, like that seed, our small beginnings can grow to a great size that can bring change on a global scale. On this Ash Wednesday the Church's focus is on being ready to change – that is repent, and we do this to prepare for Easter when God's love broke through the wall of our selfish ego. To repent or change we need the kind of commitment which doesn't bend or retreat at the first real challenge or sticky patch. This in turn needs the kind of ordered thinking and daily habits that can bring good ideas to a good outcome. Without discipline good ideas just pave the road to hell, or at best, going round in directionless circles. So, what should be our attitude to Lent. The first thing to say, this year of all years, is that many of us have already given up so much because of the pandemic. Given up our freedom to go out when we want and where we want. Given up spontaneous conversations with friend or stranger. Given up shopping casually or even expecting our favourite fashion shop to exist in the High Street anymore. We have given up lingering over a 'cuppa' in Morrisons, or wherever, or going out for a meal with family or to our Wednesday church service or our club, or Scouts or Guides. Given up the sound of children in a school playground. Given up realistic expectations of a planned holiday. Given up singing the Lord's praises in his house. Given up the handshake or embrace of the Peace, given up the common cup at Communion, given up the likelihood of seeing new faces in church. Given up so many aspects of our mission to this community through baptism, schools, bumps and babes. Given up... you fill the gaps.

So what are you going to ask us to give up for Lent, Richard!? Booze, chocolate, tea, coffee, treats? How can we really prepare to celebrate that Easter triumph of Jesus, by giving up more?

Our Lent studies this year are from the USPG course '**For Such a Time As This**'. It asks serious questions of each of us which challenge us to do the ordered thinking that will bring about long term change especially in our habits of consumption. It points to deeper values which are Gospel inspired and which lead to truer personal fulfilment. This course might have been a gloomy analysis of human prospects but in fact it offers a scriptural vision based on hope for a human future and that is joy filled. It is a vision freed from the cycle of ever increasing material consumption and a competitive struggle for vanishing resources. Those of you with very long memories or who have studied twentieth century history will know that during the second world war, even amid the struggle and darkness of facing an implacable foe, some people were planning for a better future. Politicians of the left and right joined with and educators to bring in the 1944 Education Act. Local Authorities planned Garden Cities to replace slums and bombed neighbourhoods. The National Health Service was conceived and became the key issue in the 1945 Election and came into being on July 5th 1948 under Aneurin Bevan. The same vision is needed in this dark hour of our own.

I'm not asking you to give up things, not unless that helps in a bigger sort of giving up. And that means giving up ways of thinking and acting that refuses to challenge the self-centred view of the world that has got us all into this mess. Now is not the time for private piety that excuses us from being part of the bigger problems the world faces. We can see places (in some parts of the USA for instance, but also found closer to home) where such attitudes sequester the Christian faith in order to provide a refuge from costly personal responsibility. Repentance which brings change is something the whole world needs to urgently address and Christians, far from being privileged by-standers, should be fore-most in bringing about this change. The best that can be said for giving things up is that it helps to bring order and discipline to our bodies and minds so they can be prepared for the big changes that really matter.

Wishing you all a Lent that will renew us all through Godly change. Richard

Thoughts on our Gospel Reading: The woman caught in adultery, John 7.53 – 8.11

This passage is odd because it is not always found in the same place in the ancient manuscripts of the Gospels. It is found in its present place in the Gospel according to St John in only one of the most ancient and reliable texts, otherwise it is found either at the very end of other very early manuscripts, like a sort of appendix, or in St Luke chapter 21 after verse 38 or elsewhere. Sometimes it is omitted altogether from the Gospels. Some scholars suggest its place at the very end of John points to it being a 'loose' story which was truly valued as being very 'like' Jesus in its attitude and its setting and yet came to be valued not because it was part of the four Gospels but because it was one of the many stories that circulated in the early church in a remembered or oral form. Little clues tell us it is not really part of St John, such as its use of Greek phrases found often in the first three Gospels but rarely or never in John. One e.g. is that it refers to 'Scribes and Pharisees' which is a phrase used endlessly in the first three Gospels but 'Scribes' are never mentioned in John. Then there is the fact our episode interrupts the flow of the story and so John 7. 52 would very happily be followed by John 8. 12. Weighing all the evidence, serious scholars concur it didn't form part of the original Gospel of John. However, far from undermining the truthfulness of our passage or of the Gospels generally, it gives evidence for the process by which they were formed. This process includes both the genius of each of the writers inspired by the Holy Spirit and equally the authority of the circulating stories about Jesus that were preserved by individuals and churches for preaching purposes before they were written in an ordered form. This passage was just so true to what they all knew of their Saviour that it couldn't be left out of the record. This poor wretch of a woman not only had a new life given to her by Jesus, she has also given us a secure episode of an incident in Christ's earthly life that tells us so much about his character and purpose.

So, to the meat of the passage. Like all the Gospels this episode speaks of Jesus regularly teaching and we are probably meant to see this happening in the Temple precincts. Like Luke's account of this time, Jesus spent the night on the Mount of Olives which is where Passover pilgrims typically camped. There is no doubt that the setting is very true to the conditions of first century Judea, sometime well before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. This is shown in the particular way the Law of Moses was expedited in cases of adultery. Adultery by a man had to be with a married or betrothed woman, but for a woman it meant any extra-marital sex. Execution by stoning seems to have been rare but reserved for women who fornicated when she was married or espoused. Otherwise the punishment would be by strangulation not stoning. The accusers misquote Moses. Moses said, 'such people', they said, 'such women'. Oh how male prejudices twist the truth! And Leviticus 20.10//Deuteronomy 22.22 simply said "put to death", not stoned. The object is to 'purge the evil from Israel' rather than exact vindictive punishment.

The woman was literally 'caught with her shame upon her'. It was necessary that for the case to be proved in such a situation it could not be by circumstantial evidence. Both the witnesses must have seen the act of coitus at the same time. If the case was proved they had to cast the first stones. The circumstances of this event have the hall-marks of a 'set up' to catch both her and Jesus. The man in this relationship was allowed to escape. With a male defendant the stakes would have been much higher for the accusers. There was also a financial aspect to all this. A divorced wife took her property with her but a dead one left it to her husband.

By bringing the adulteress to Jesus he is put into the situation of having to choose. But the choice is two-fold. Since Rome didn't allow people to be executed outside its jurisdiction, if Jesus approved her death he would offend Rome and provide a pretext to bring him before Pilate. If, on the other hand, he defended the woman he would directly oppose the Levitical code that required her death. This has parallels in the story of paying tax to Caesar (Mark 12. 13-17). Secondly Jesus is required to choose between approving or disapproving of this terrible and damaging sin. In our own age we have grown used to skirting round the hard consequences of this sin, but think of the effects on the family of broken trust and illegitimacy in every society before our own. Like theft it could bring victims to penury and death. The Law was there for a good

reason but the way it was applied, especially against this woman who was used to get at someone else, contradicted higher principals of righteousness and also gave license to chauvinism. As our text says, 'This they said to tempt him'. There is evidence from Jewish writings of the period that many people considered the death penalty as the wrong thing in these circumstances and the very fact the accusers brought her to Jesus tells us there was a case to be made. Why not just take her out! In this predicament Jesus throws the challenge back and sets it in the widest context of our human condition, 'Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone'.

I must spend a moment to reflect on Jesus stooping to write on the ground - twice. Calvin says it was to show Jesus despised the accusers. But William Temple says Jesus 'is tortured by the horror of it all. He will not look at them or her. He stoops to hide the burning confusion of his face and relieves his agitation by tracing patterns in the dust'. Some suggest he wrote the text of Exodus 23.1 – 'Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness'. Yet others say he writes his own sentence in the dust, a sentence of freedom through grace.

Finally, Jesus refers to her as 'Woman'. It is worth remembering that this is how John recalls Jesus speaking to his mother from the cross. It is not a harsh way to address her, indeed, Jesus' own mother, being unmarried but promised to Joseph when Jesus was conceived, could well have been subject to the same judgement that was levelled at this adulteress. If you want to explore the well-springs of Jesus' own compassion to the sinner you might start there and see the outward circumstances of his own origins as the test bed for the way he responded in a truly Godly way to our confused and sinful human condition.

Happy Lent ! Richard.