

The 5th Sunday of Lent (Year C): The Promise of spiritual freedom.

First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21: Israel's hope for a fresh start;

Second Reading: Philippians 3:8-14: St Paul's hope for the future;

Gospel: John 8:1-11: Jesus offers an adulteress forgiveness – and hope.

This weekend, we leave St Luke for a strange event in St John. Because this story is more typical of Luke's style than John's, some think it has ended up in the 'wrong' gospel! Anyway, it is where it is, and we use it this Sunday. But, before we go that far, it's worth mentioning the sense of optimism in the first reading: the Jews, back from exile in about 530 BC, have a sense of hope for their future in their own country. I suggest the Church uses this reading to look forward to the hope & promise the Easter stories will bring to us. But I think we may find the second reading even more useful – St Paul, in a very personal comment to the Philippians, writes of his own faith & hope. He is no longer trying to be "perfect" by his own efforts, based on the rules of the Jewish Law; rather, he wants "the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God...Not that I have become perfect yet; I have not yet won, but I am still running..." This admission of human weakness and his desire to become better is very honest, and it reminds me of the 2nd Vatican Council's view of the Church in the 1960's. It moved away from the "Mystical Body of Christ" idea of a perfect society (as taught in the 1950's) to the more down-to-earth "Pilgrim People of God". This admits that we are on a journey (to God's Kingdom); we are not 'there' yet, but we are using God's help to reach our goal.

So, we move to the gospel. Please do read it! Sometimes, religious teaching & ideas can seem 'airy-fairy' - cut off from real life - but this gospel story is awfully practical. Jesus, teaching on the Mount of Olives (near the Temple) was approached by some scribes & Pharisees, who brought to him a woman "caught in the very act of committing adultery" (as they so graphically put it). They mentioned Moses' law in Deuteronomy 22:22, which demanded the death penalty (by stoning) for both the man & the woman. (It's worth noting that they hadn't brought the man along; also, the death penalty for adultery was largely in disuse by Jesus' lifetime, though it was still 'on the books'.) They were testing him – wanting him to appear either too harsh (if he wanted her killed) or too soft (if he wanted her let off). He said nothing, but wrote inscrutably in the dust on the ground. When they persevered, he looked up and said the famous words: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone at her..." Naturally, they all

disappeared, starting with the eldest. Left alone with her, he simply said to her:” Neither do I condemn you; go away and sin no more.”

However, let us not understate the damage done by this woman: the family was the bedrock on which ancient society was built; therefore adultery threatened everyone’s stability. Admittedly, when people look at this with 21st century eyes, they tend to see the unfairness of women’s place in that society: how they were subjugated then (and still are, in some cultures today); how the ‘guilty party’ in adultery was assumed to be the temptress woman; how the responsibility for family cohesion fell to the mother – and so on. But all that said, this gospel reflects the serious worry about family breakdown then. (I have often commented on the shock felt by modern immigrants to the UK, when they see our indifference to co-habitation, adultery and divorce.) If you read the story, you may also get a sense of the woman’s embarrassment, sadness, and sense of shame at having given in to temptation. She probably also wondered how and where she could find forgiveness. But those emotions could also apply to any of us, when we commit serious sin.

Although the scribes & Pharisees had no serious intention of stoning the woman (I think), they were still testing Jesus’ response. However, in this sort of moral problem, there are limits to the usefulness of any system of public “Law”. Jesus did not condemn the woman – he could see her spiritual state – but neither did he condone her sin: he told her to avoid it in the future.

How does all this help us, in this last fortnight of Lent? I’ve said before that, after 24 months of misery through the pandemic, I’d be less inclined to worry about giving things up this year. However, most of you reading this are spiritually adult, and we ought to do something. I suggest we take time to think of St Paul’s words I quoted in my 1st paragraph. How far am I “not perfect yet”? In what areas do I fail? Am I “still running” – ie, trying my best? How deep is “my faith in Christ”? Our Lord’s treatment of that woman in the gospel shows both his compassion for the sinner (“Neither do I condemn you”) and his insistence that we have moral standards (“Sin no more”). I suggest that most of us (in the Vatican Council’s 1960’s phrase) are on a pilgrimage. We haven’t yet reached the destination, and sometimes we get knocked off-course. That’s life! *Fr Jim Dunne.*