

Caught in the act

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Ash Wednesday, 16th February 2021
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: John 8:1-8

Introduction:

I wonder what is your reaction to hearing this story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery? For many of us, there's a sense of unfairness: you can't commit adultery on your own, so where is the man she was in bed with? Was he just lucky to escape as his clandestine tryst with the woman was discovered? Or was he *allowed* to escape? What were the circumstances of the offence - was she a married woman, betraying the trust of her husband? Or a single woman, having an affair with a married man? Was she a free agent, or acting under compulsion? Had she been abused or exploited? Is this just another example of a woman being blamed for leading a poor helpless man astray? Or was she in fact without excuse, a person who had made a bad choice and was now facing the consequences?

In one sense, none of this matters, because for the writer of this narrative, the focus is on Jesus: how does he deal with this attempt by his enemies to discredit him? What can we learn about Jesus from the way he dealt with the woman? What message is there here for us?

Jesus on trial

This is one of my favourite stories in the Bible, because of the masterful way that Jesus handles the situation. For the religious leaders, it is not the woman who is on trial, but Jesus. Jesus' enemies think they've got him over a barrel. They know he mixes with people who don't keep the Law,

who have a reputation for a dodgy lifestyle – even prostitutes and – worst of all – tax collectors! In fact, it's obvious that Jesus is soft on sin. Way too liberal. And yet he claims to be a teacher sent from God. Here's a little conundrum that will make or break him.

The woman is brought in and made to stand in the centre of a circle that has gathered around Jesus, who is sitting on the ground. She is exposed, frightened, shamed, treated as “exhibit A”. A sin that we would consider a private matter is thrust into the public arena.

The facts of the case are clear: the woman had committed adultery, and the punishment in the Law of God is death. What does Jesus say? Will he uphold the Law of God and condemn the sinner, or show that he is indeed soft on sin – and thus discredit himself with his own mouth? It may also be relevant that under Roman rule the Jewish authorities were not authorised to carry out a death sentence. Will Jesus uphold the law of God, or side with the Romans?

Jesus deals with this situation in a way only Jesus could. First he keeps them waiting, writing with his finger in the sand. Is he doodling? Or writing a verse from the scriptures? But then he straightens up and throws the ball back to his enemies, and in doing so demonstrates at once the justice, the grace and the wisdom of God.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again.”

What are we to make of this? That Jesus is fine with adultery, provided there are mitigating circumstances? For the church today, looking out of touch with how society's beliefs about sex have "moved on", it would be very convenient to see this story as justification for a liberal moral view. "Do you think God is really bothered about what goes on in the bedroom?" people ask. "As long as it's between consenting adults, it's fine".

But that is not what Jesus says. At no point does he seek to excuse the woman, or minimise her offence. His final words are "Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again." In that one sentence he acknowledges the reality of her sin, but also gives her a second chance. And so for me there are two clear points for us that come out of this story.

1) We are all sinners.

Faced with Jesus' challenge that the person without sin can throw the first stone, no one picks up a stone. I think of Jesus' teaching that we should take the plank out of our own eye before trying to take the speck out of someone else's eye. The English proverb says that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Hypocrisy is trying to take the moral high ground while your motives are insincere. The Pharisees here seem to be more intent on using the woman as bait for Jesus than on doing what was right. Did you notice how they say that "in the law Moses commanded us to stone such *women*." Actually, the law applied equally to men and women¹. Their latent misogyny is thinly disguised.

You will remember St Paul's words in his letter to the Romans "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). This story is not just about sexual sin. It's about the status of all of us before a holy God – we are all under God's judgement.

¹ Deuteronomy 22:22-24

It is all too easy for us to pick up stones against others, or to pick on those who are most easy to criticise. Blaming others is a convenient distraction from our own failures. As we begin Lent today, Jesus' words invite each of us to examine our own consciences and to take the plank out of our own eyes before taking the speck out of the eye of another.

2) Through Jesus, God offers grace instead of condemnation.

Although we are all sinners, and all deserve God's judgement, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"². Jesus' words to the woman are also said to us: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." The grace of Christ does not say, "sin doesn't matter". The whole point of the Law was to show us that sin does matter, and we should keep away from it. But to God sinners matter even more. Through his words, Jesus offers the woman forgiveness and a new start.

Whatever sins we have committed, whether with our bodies, with our words or with our thoughts, Jesus says to us when we truly repent and ask for his forgiveness, "You are no longer under condemnation. You may go. Do not sin again."

Lent is a season of self-examination and self-discipline, an opportunity to take time to examine ourselves - our lifestyle, our relationships, our faith in God; and to allow his word and his Spirit to search our hearts and minds. Jesus has shown us how God deals with sinners - with forgiveness and grace. By his Spirit he will reach into our lives and bring us healing, restoration and a new start.

Tonight we receive the symbol of the Cross in ash on our foreheads, reminding us both of our mortality and of the Cross where Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for your sin

² John 3:17

and mine, bearing the punishment for the sins of the whole world, taking our place, and reconciling us to God the Father. We receive the mark of the Cross with the words "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ".

And in the sacrament of the bread and wine which will be consumed tonight, Jesus invites us to receive this grace which he won for us: "This is my body, broken for you", "this is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins." "Take it - it's for you."