



Lent 5

THE NEW SHOFAR

see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.

And so now John draws us into his story of salvation

Imagine the state of that poor woman in the Gospel story. Barefoot and dishevelled. Sweaty from the struggle as these self-righteous men drag her through the public square and into the Temple area. Picture the look. A mop of hair hanging over her face. Her jaw is fixed. Her teeth, clenched. Her lips, pressed together into thin lines of resistance with maybe more than a hint of despair. Her nostrils, flared out in a very human way in breathy defiance even though she knows the dire situation she is in. Death is but a heartbeat away.

The Law verses love, mercy and grace

The charge is clear to the authorities and fully in keeping with the Law of God. Her sin is clear and the assigned punishment equally clear. *Adulteress* is what they are calling her. Sinner. Harlot. Scarlet woman. ****. It is all clearcut and obvious because she has been *caught in the very act*. Cannot help but wonder though, caught by whom? Who informed on her? Why were they lurking around the “scene of the crime” in the first place? Something stinks here.

John paints a great picture here. The teachers and Pharisees appeal to the Law and are clearly looking for the death penalty. But for a person to be put to death the Law requires that there be at least two eyewitnesses. Eyewitnesses to *the very act of adultery*. This is where the artist John shines as he urges us to imagine these religious leaders nosing around her windowsill. How did they watch? How much did they see? What were their thoughts? How long did they watch? Were they like the leaders of ISIS rejoicing in the bloodletting they were about to initiate? And were not their hearts filled with adultery as they eavesdropped?

Then they add shame, humiliation and insult to their sins

When they had seen enough (and how much is enough?) these guardians of morality stormed the door to the bedroom where she lay naked and defenceless. They grabbed her as she struggled as they wrestled to subdue her. They grabbed her and notably left the man behind. Only women are guilty of adultery, another wonderful quirk of the ancient Law.

It was in this state she finally arrived at the temple. Dragged away from the intimacy of a loving embrace she now finds herself in a shameful public

humiliation. She must have seen her past flash past her eyes, not a shred of hope to sustain her. Her fate is now tragically in the hands of these evil, heartless, judgmental men. Men for whom sin is something other people do. In their eyes, sad, pathetic people like this woman. It is just the way they see others who are different to them, different to the way they see the world, see God and see themselves. Sin is the way of the weak and the weak need to be exterminated for the good of their religion.

Again, we go back to John's fantastic image. He shows her standing there, sullen, her eyes black with despair and hopelessness. And there in the mob, every eye that circles her returns a look of their own, this time with searing hate, branding a scarlet letter onto her soul. Every eye that is except for one set - those of Jesus.

Where there is self-righteousness there is hatred

In the meantime, it is worth raising another question: where is her lover? The way the Gospel reads, it is almost as if there has been a prior agreement between the religious leaders and the man. A plot perhaps to ensnare Jesus? We do not know but we do know from non-biblical Jewish writings that this kind of action was not unknown. The ends for them justify the means. As well as that, they are not really interested in the woman. She is nothing more than live bait. It is Jesus they want, and it tells us much about their integrity. They are prepared to destroy a woman for the sake of their own self-righteousness and self-importance. What kind of Law do they think they are obeying?

Time and again Jesus has shown compassion on sinners. Mercy and love are what he has always shown above observance of the letter of the Law, even though the Law of Moses is uncompromising and impartial in its treatment of them. If the religious leaders can somehow trap Jesus between his loyalty to the Law and his steadfast loving mercy for sinners. If he frees her, so they are thinking, as he most certainly will, he forsakes the Law. Then they will have cause to accuse him before the Sanhedrin. Then they will succeed in their goal – have him put to death.

The question they use to spring the trap is not a theoretical one. It is a question of life and death in whose balance hangs not only the fate of this woman but the fate of Christ as well. Again, we see how John, our master writer builds the tension and impales the leaders with a simple question of his own. Not that he waits for an answer. He further bamboozles them by stooping down and writing in the dirt.

The silence is deafening. The drama, intense. With his finger he writes in the sand. The necks of the righteous crane to decipher the writing. What he writes will forever remain a mystery. Maybe it is the sins the crowd has committed. Maybe it is a quote from Moses. Maybe it is the names of the prominent leaders there. Whatever he writes is for their eyes, not ours. But whatever it is he writes does not register, for they persist in pressing him for a judgment.

Why do sinners insist on playing God in judging other sinners?

Jesus stands up. All eyes are fixed on him as he milks the moment with an silence. At last he responds with those memorable words: *If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.* Some of the crowd that had followed the mob would have been caught in mid-throw as they eagerly anticipated the break in the monotony of their normal day. Like a hanging in the old West, these were moment not to be missed by anyone! However, one by one the stones thud to the ground as the words of Jesus hit home. And one by one the men leave. Starting with the oldest, perhaps because they are the wisest- or the most guilty.

Jesus stoops to write again. But this time it is only for *her* eyes. They are the only two left. He is the only one qualified to condemn her but he doesn't bother. The Saviour stood up for this unknown woman. He had seen how others had ganged up on her, had not bothered to find out anything about her, but yet had still found her lacking. He had stood by her, had covered her back, and shown her love and respect. She is his victory, the victory of love over hatred, life over death. In the victory he offered her is an insight into the victory he offers to all of us.

Love conquers all and God is love

And we now have another great question: *Has no one condemned you?* She waits for a reply, the kind of reply she must have heard many times before. But the great think about Jesus here is that he does not even deliver a sermon, a remonstrance over her sinful ways. He does not preach to her. He of all people would have been entitled to give one.

What comes out instead are words of grace: *neither do I condemn you*, and words of truth, that her life of sin needs to be left behind. Repent is what he was saying but in language she could not help but understand. And as with all acts of love, it brings out a whole new life and the transformation is instantaneous. We can imagine how her trembling began to subside. Her face soften. The furrows on her forehead relax. She is already a new woman. He takes a breath, and his breath now seems to say *off you go now, you're free.* Healed, restored, forgiven.

It is all about how we see and find Christ in the "other"

Have we ever stopped and wondered what that poor woman's life might have been like after that day, after she had met Jesus? After her gift of life? After the gift of forgiveness, after having been shown the healing grace of God in her life? She is a new woman with a whole new world before her. That is just what Jesus does for people. But part of what John is telling us today is the way our God-given vocation here in this parish is to be like our Lord. To see in others what he sees in them, to act towards them in the same way he acts towards them. To reach out to those the wider community dislikes, misunderstands and sometimes even hates in the very same way he does.

I love this story because it is so reflective of everyday life. Not specifically the adultery, though that is far too common in our modern world. No, what it highlights is the way those who consider themselves to be righteous can so easily gang up on those who are different from the way they like to think they are. They see “sin” in others whereas Jesus can only see a child of God. Jesus sees a person rich with possibilities, filled with graces from the Heavenly Father, graces that he has given her so that others in the community may be blessed.

John highlights the thinking of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They view the world through the lens of the Law. They do not see people. They see...what? But it also raises another biblical question: what do we see when we see sinners, or problem-makers; those who are different, those on the margins and rejected by others? What is the lens through which we filter the lives, names, reputations, deeds, words of those around us?

What might this all mean for our Lenten pilgrimage?

Our first reading from Isaiah adds to our reflections on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. As it was with the woman in the Gospel story, this is all about the possibility of a new life...¹⁸ *Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not;* ¹⁹ *see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.* The way Isaiah speaks here it is all about what God is already doing, already unfolding in their lives even when the Hebrew people themselves can see nothing but doom, death and destruction. Their world is a world without hope. Everything has fallen apart for them and they can see no way forward.

Then, out of the blue the prophet comes forward with this powerful message. They do not have to wait if they want their lives to change. To their surprise, they are told that God is already changing them, if only they have the eyes of faith so see. In God theirs can be a whole new world. Where there was nothing, there is now hope. All they need to do is to trust in God!

But how do they (we) manage that? By doing what we have been urged to be doing for our Lenten discipline: daily prayer – daily Bible readings and reflections – works of charity – acts of self-denial.

And there is more...

- Recognize and acknowledge before God that we are sinners. We have been saved through grace, but we remain sinners in need of grace.
- Value, appreciate, affirm, love, respect and all others.
- Always ask before speaking and acting – what would Jesus do here?