

## 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT, C

### BETWEEN HUMAN JUDGEMENT AND GOD'S MERCY

*"If there is one among you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her ... Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more" (John 8: 7, 11)*

**Our Story:** On my WhatsApp Status is a captivating picture of a finger on the ground with the word, "Forgiven" written upside down so that the one standing opposite the writer can read it clearly. This picture summarises the story of the narrative of the woman "caught in the very act of committing adultery" that the Church presents to us this week. This story is one that raises many questions and issues deserving of our reflection. There is the question of the whereabouts of the man; the issue of social inequality against women; the question of a set up or gang up against Jesus; and the issue of law, justice, and mercy. In all these, Jesus teaches us the difference between the magnanimity of God's mercy and the mischievous judgement of man. The justice of God is His mercy, and the mercy of God is His justice; the sinner is more valuable than the sin; and that the sin is to be condemned but the sinner should be forgiven with the hope of a better future. Human judgement on the other hand is hypocritical, punitive, selfish, and inconsiderate of the offender. For man, the weight of justice is against the weaker, the poorer and the less privileged.

**The Setting:** The story is set in the Outer Court of the Temple that was a very public place where different people often would gather to be instructed on various aspects of the law by the available Rabbi. This was a perfect venue if one wanted to have a large audience, which is exactly what the Pharisees and the scribes wanted since their intention was not so much to deal with the guilt of the woman but to "test" Jesus so that they could trap Him – the larger the crowd the greater would the shame be. Are there still some of us like these devious enemies of Jesus, who would set up others for a public disgrace? Do we set traps for friends and others to watch them fall in shame so we could mock them and invite others to do so?

**"Caught in the very act of committing adultery:"** St John narrates that the scribes and the Pharisees brought along a woman who had been caught in the very act of committing adultery. This woman is not named. So, she could refer to any of us, sinners. But why bring the woman and leave the man? If she was "caught in the very act," then it means the man was within reach. The Jewish

society at the time of Jesus was a society that was most unfair to the woman. But is our age quite different? Are we not still struggling with issues of unequal payments, unequal employment opportunities, abuses of women and all forms of inequalities against women today? The Torah was clear that adultery is a capital offense; and that both the man and the woman should be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22: 22-24; Leviticus 20: 10). These men, in their viciousness, let the man go free, while dragging the woman through the streets to the temple and “made her stand in the middle” in shame and humiliation. Was Jesus seeing in this woman the shame and humiliation that He would be subjected to in days to come? Can we see in this woman the shame our sins subject us to whether we are caught or not? With fake and flattering respect, they called Jesus’ “Teacher” or “Master” (depending on the translation) as they reported the offense of the frightened woman, and asked; “What do you say?” They “did this to test Him, so they could bring a charge against Him.” Beware of flatterers! And please, don’t be one.

***The Complex Question:*** The scribes and Pharisees were clearly out to test Jesus to possibly implicate Him. A “Yes” would have set Jesus against the Roman authority, who reserved the prerogative to condemn anyone to death; and would have contradicted His own teaching on mercy and forgiveness. A “No” would have set Him against the Torah, the Mosaic Law, that guided the religious life of the Jewish people. In His wisdom, Jesus knew both the strategy and intention of the scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman. Therefore, instead of giving a direct answer He acted differently: “But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with His finger.” Was that to give Himself some time? Or was He broken by the pains of man’s hypocrisy and readiness to pass judgement against another even when he is a worse sinner? Or was He seeing in this drama, a prologue to His imminent betrayal, condemnation, and execution? What was going on in His mind? What was He writing?

***The sinful Woman and the Sinless Jesus:*** Pressed by the accusers, Jesus looked up and spoke the unexpected: “If there is one among you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” The narrative reports that they left “one by one, beginning with the eldest.” One can only imagine the silence that must have deadened the noisy crowd as these words bellowed out. The word of Jesus was an address to the heart (the conscience) not to the ears. It was a demand for personal examination of conscience. But who can be just in the sight of God, for all have sinned (Romans 3: 23)? The Psalmist reminds us: “In sin I was born, a sinner was I conceived (Psalm 51: 5). Everyman with a stone in hand was

a sinner with sins in his heart, and so, there was no one among them who had not sinned. Therefore, they had to leave one by one, leaving the sinful (woman) to encounter the sinless (Jesus) in the court of divine judgement.

***“Neither do I condemn you. Go, but sin no more”***: What a lesson, that the only one who could condemn, was the one who had mercy. Jesus did not see a sinner in front of Him, He saw a human being who needed forgiveness and another chance. Note that Jesus’ forgiveness was not an encouragement, nor a licence. Jesus here gives us the principle of dealing with the sinner and the sin - love the sinner, show compassion/empathy, forgive her but condemn the sin and the act. The action of Jesus is ad rem with His love for man, His redemptive mission and believe in man’s ability to change and live a better and righteous life. Jesus teaches us here that authority is not all about power and the exploitation of the weak and the guilty but about love, pity, empathy, and mercy. We learn here too that even the righteous does not have the right to judge and to condemn. It is a lesson here that we all can be forgiven and have a chance to start afresh.

***My dear friends***, the words of Isaiah in the First Reading encourage us not to recall, dwell on and live in the past “Remember not the events of the past ...” because the past has been forgiven (Isaiah 43: 16-21). St. Paul in the Second reading (Phil. 3: 8-14) expresses similar words: “Forgetting what lies behind ...” We can understand the spiritual import of these within the context of Lent, urging us to forget any failures of our Lenten resolutions, mortifications, and sacrifices. As we journey through this season of Lent, which is soon ending, let us see ourselves as this woman, a sinner who is forgiven and set free by the loving mercy of God. Let us seek that liberating knowledge of Christ that leads to perfection (Philippians 3: 8-14). Let us heed the words of Jesus: Go, but sin no more.”