

Lent 5

We are told by those who study the New Testament that this passage about the woman taken in adultery was not originally part of John's Gospel but was inserted later. A Fr. George Macrae, who taught at the Jesuit school of theology in Cambridge in the 1970s, once wrote that its origin is unknown but somehow it became attached to John's Gospel and is made to fit in with it by means of a line in this same chapter (8:15) where Jesus says of himself, "You judge by appearances, but I do not judge anyone." For that is how he acts in this story. He does not judge this woman.

We could almost make this story a parable and then add it to the three parables we find in Luke's Gospel which portray God as being a God of overwhelming love: the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Commenting on these three parables, the Australian scripture scholar Brendan Byrne tells us that the three main characters in these parables are all a bit "wacky." A sensible shepherd does not leave the flock to find one animal; a sensible woman does spend all day looking for a penny, and a sensible father does not spend his days looking out at the highway in the hope of seeing a son who demanded his inheritance even before his father's death and then left home. But such is God, Jesus

is teaching us. God is crazy over us. God goes to extremes. And Jesus, we can and must say, being his Father's Son, acts in the same way in his own life. Indeed we will spend the next two weeks watching him pour his life blood for us. Infatuations are not always long-lasting. They can cool and disappear, but the Father's love and the Son's love for us does not cool but, as the bard said, "bears it out even to the edge of doom." Or as Paul put it, speaking of Jesus, "he loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

But this story of the woman taken in adultery does not present itself as a parable but rather as an incident in the life of Jesus. Like so many incidents presented to us in the Gospels, this one is part of an entrapment. At the beginning of ch. 7 in this Gospel we are told that Jesus was in Galilee and did not want to travel to Judea, to Jerusalem, because the people in charge there were trying to kill him. His brothers, we are told, who do not believe in him, urge him to go up, but he refuses to do so. But then later he changes his mind and goes. And that is today's scene. Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem teaching and the scribes and Pharisees bring this woman caught in adultery before him.

Isn't there something wrong with this story from the very beginning? Where is the man? For usually it is the man who

initiates such relationships. There is an awful bias, it seems to me, at the beginning of the story. It is as if the girls enslaved in a sex shop were to be blamed for being promiscuous rather than the men who frequent such establishments.

And, following this lead, there is the complete lack of awareness of the woman herself, for her situation, for her embarrassment, for her shame, even for the possible loss of her life, for the punishment for adultery is death by stoning. Her accusers don't care about her at all. She is just a tool they are using to catch Jesus. They want to force him to make a judgment which will make him disloyal to the Jewish law or the Roman law. If he says she must die, he will be in trouble with the Roman because only they have the power to condemn to death; but if he says she must be freed, he will be seen as contradicting the Law of Moses.

Jesus outfoxes them. The arguments and accusations continue, and the mood grows hotter. But Jesus, we are told, bends down and writes with his finger in the sandy soil. And, finally, he stands up and gives a very unexpected command: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Oh, the wisdom of Solomon is here.

These critics of Jesus now come off better than we would have expected. They have enough honesty to admit that they are sinners. Therefore, they cannot cast a stone at this poor woman. And so they go away, one by one. Perhaps they have had a change of heart. Perhaps Jesus' words have brought them to a realization of their own sinfulness.

Then Jesus and the woman can converse. He does not condemn her, but at the same time he cautions her against the continuation of such conduct: "Do not sin any more."

At the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis, in an interview on the plane-ride back to Rome from Brazil, said this of priests with a homosexual orientation: "If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?"

"Who am I to judge?" says Francis. "Neither do I condemn you," says the Lord. Perhaps the lesson we can take from today's Gospel story is a willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt, to be slow to condemn others, to be willing to see things from their point of view and not simply from our own. Such openness is another name for charity. It is the living of the law of love. It is the living out of the Lord's injunction that we should not try to remove

splinters from other people's eyes when there is a beam in our own which makes it impossible for us to see anything as it really is.

“Who am I to judge?” “Neither do I condemn you.”