

Ash Wednesday Homily, 2019.

John 8:1-11

Our Gospel is a passage which you could say is as shallow as a pool - that you can take much from it, on a first reading - but also one like a deep well, which as we reflect upon it we see other applications. If we take away nothing else, it is a longing for the incredible wisdom of Jesus, shown here, to fill us each and every day, when it feels like there are only bad options in front of us and we are trying to find the best bad way forward!

Jesus sat down. Quite possible he is at the southern steps, near the main entrances and exits into the temple courts. A very public space where this all happens.

Into this space the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman "caught in adultery" - a woman caught in the act. When they speak to Jesus they say she has been caught in adultery and then at the end when it is just Jesus and her, he says - go now and leave your life of sin. So there is no question it seems of her guilt - she has not been falsely accused - she has committed sin.

The religious there say that the Mosaic Law commands she be stoned. What do you say? It is a trap, as John writes.

What kind of trap. Maybe three ways. Firstly. If Jesus does not agree with them - they think - then that shows they can accuse him of being very light or liberal with the laws of Moses - as they suspect he is, after the controversies over the Sabbath for example.

2. If he does agree to the stoning, then they can use this to ruin his reputation among sinners and tax collectors accuse him of being hardline.

The third way - the Romans only held the right to execute someone - hence why Jesus is later brought before Pilate on Good Friday by the Sandhedrin leaders - and so the trap, is they can go to the Romans and say, here is someone who is against Roman Law. It is a public space.

Jesus says nothing. It recalls and reminds us of his silence before Pilate, Herod, and before his accusers at the Sandhedrin, which we will remember on Good Friday. He writes in the ground. He is sitting, he sat down to teach, he is teaching. What is he teaching them. What is he teaching us?

Worth re-reading these verse during this Lent, imaging yourself back into that situation, to be different characters, but each time pause at this point, what is Jesus teaching in the silence.

*What is Jesus teaching you in that silence?*

After being pressed. "If any of you are without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he is silent and again he writes.

Whoever is without sin. And the older ones leave first. What sin do they acknowledge?

Well the religious had come and quoted Moses. The law did say the death penalty for a woman caught in adultery. But the law in Lev 20 and Deut 22, does say both the man and woman are guilty. Where is the man? Did they let him off? Was he someone they knew - it is easier to apply the law for someone you don't know or don't like, but for a friend, a colleague, a loved one? Did the man run away? Was he someone in the crowd, maybe a scribe - this may sound cruel but the Christian church through the years has been afflicted by the true stories of people in religious positions of authority becoming involved in adultery. The fact he is not there, shows the law is not being truly applied. They are perhaps saying they know best how to apply the law - they can decide when it applies or not?

*By walking away did they acknowledge they had broken the law, as the woman had. As James reminds us in James 2:8-11, we cannot say we keep some parts of the law and not others. We are a law breaker, regardless of which ones we break.*

Is the sin, that their motives for bringing this woman forward were all wrong? Jesus on a different occasion had said to the Pharisees went they were placing tradition over and above scripture : "these people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." (Matthew 15). Their motivation for bringing the woman was not to uphold the Law, or defend marriage, or show God's holiness. It was to trap Jesus... They pretend it is for God's holiness, the Law or show the importance to marriage - but it is a way to trap Jesus, to find a way to accuse him.

*Do they walk away knowing they have sin in their hearts and wrong motivations...*

Or is it even broader. Here the timing of this event may be important. This passage is in between two sets of teaching in held during the Feast of Tabernacles, recorded in John 7 and 8. This Feast was usually in Sept or October. It was 5 days after the Day of Atonement - some 5-6 days before priests had declared they were, along with the entire nation, all with sin and the goat was killed and the other one sent away - possible from near that point - that place where Jesus may well be teaching. There were regular sacrifices, yet Yom Kippur, acknowledges that sacrifices has not covered every act of intentional or unintentional sin. There is a statement that they have sinned in ways which are unseen or forgotten.

Does Jesus challenge, ask them - 'Have you forgotten already in 5-6 days how sinful people are?'

And the Feast of Tabernacles - recalls the time in the desert, and provision. But it recalls the desert. Why were they in the desert for 40 years? It wasn't only all faith and victory. They were so long in the desert due to sin. So in a Feast they recall God's provision, but his

provision when the nation was often guilty of sin (in different forms, including sexual sin - see Numbers 25).

So in a Feast time which is about mercy - God provided even though they sinned, he forgave when he could have done much worse - about grace - they will not give it to her?

*Do they walk away, for they acknowledge that while this woman has sinned, they too have sinned, and fallen short of God's glorious standard. If they judge her, they too should be judged.*

The woman and Jesus are left alone. Has no one condemned you. No one. Neither do I. Now that is sometimes where our minds can end it. But Jesus goes on to say - go now and leave your life of sin.

We see not condemnation. We see sin not condoned.

Jesus calls on her to repent - to change her lifestyle in its attitudes and actions, to turn around and go a new direction, God's direction.

She receives mercy. She receives grace.

Consider who is in that temple court, who was writing on the ground. The Word Made Flesh. The great I AM - as Jesus states very clearly further on into chapter 8. The One who is declared to Israel 'be holy as I am holy' when he gave the law, including the laws about adultery in Leviticus. The One is speaking to her, who calls her to be holy, as he is holy.

The One who declared to Moses - The LORD THE LORD the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." He is there and he shows his grace and mercy. She does not get what she deserves - she is shown mercy and grace.

Just before this passage, we read how Jesus has said, (John 7:37-39) - 'come to me and streams of living water will flow from within them'.

When I was in Israel, there were times of rain, and you can see when the waters come and where the waters flows, those parts of the land, it is alive, vibrant, the landscape becomes changed, you see the green alongside the areas which are watered, and the dry areas.

Jesus says if people come to him, streams of living water will flow, as they see it flow in the rains. Living water which brings life into a desert, life into death. Her life from desert to green, from death to life. Jesus longs for that to come into this woman's life.

The Feast of Tabernacles, which they were in the midst of, was as we said about God's gracious provision despite the sins of the people, their rebellion, God's grace poured out on Israel - people got what they did not deserve. They did not get what they did deserve. This woman too receives mercy and grace during a festival which celebrated mercy and grace.

Mercy and Grace.

Finally the woman. My team rector in Telford, Tim Storey, often would say, he would like to think when he would read certain passages, 'how did that get in the gospel?'. Who told the gospel writer that event? Here, the last moments, it seems to be only Jesus and the woman - though it is a public space. Did Jesus tell John and the 11, like he probably did about his 40 days in the wilderness? Or did the woman tell John. Was she touched by this act of grace that her life was turned round - fast - like the Samaritan woman (John 4) and others we read - or maybe slower, she came to faith and trust. But did she tell John this event - and how that was the final or first step in her coming to believe in Jesus?

So how does this fit into Lent? Lent is a time to reflect upon our discipleship. It can be about self examination - as we will do in a minute - about our walk and the habits that we need to reject etc. To recall where perhaps we are not applying God's laws to our lives, where we are doing things with wrong selfish motivations, where we

are just not honest with ourselves how we are doing as a follower of Jesus.

But I am struck can this Lent be focused on grace this year? Not only where we fall short, but also where we can grow further? I mean can we look at Jesus' acts in the coming 4 weeks and see him as the supreme example of grace, and pray into, and ask the Lord, that we would grow in grace to act and speak in similar ways. To not only receive the grace given to us, but be people giving out grace to others, even if they are unpopular or not deserving in the eyes of others?

I shared on Sunday how a minister I got on well with when in Israel sent me a message and at the end of it, to summarise he said, "let's make this a significant year for Jesus." Becoming more people of grace, becoming more grace filled surely that must be one way to become significant for Jesus...

I want to end with a story. To get you thinking. Of a situation a Christian pastor found himself in. And how perhaps it models grace. Maybe to think if what he does, maybe reflects a bit of what Jesus does...

A Party for a Prostitute. (By Tony Campolo in "The Kingdom of God is a Party").

"If you live on the East Coast and travel to Hawaii, you know that there is a time difference that makes three o'clock in the morning feel like nine. With that in mind, you will understand that whenever I go out to our fiftieth state I find myself wide awake long before dawn. Not only do I find myself up and ready to go while almost everybody else is still asleep, but I find that I want breakfast when almost everything on the island is still closed—which is why I was wandering up and down the streets of Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning, looking for a place to get something to eat.

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name “greasy spoon.” I mean, I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The big guy behind the counter came over and asked me, “What d’ya want?”

I told him, “A cup of coffee and a donut.”

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, then grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. I’m a realist. I know that in the back room of that restaurant, donuts are probably dropped on the floor and kicked around. But when everything is out front where I could see it, I really would have appreciated it if he had used a pair of tongs and placed the donut on some wax paper.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at three-thirty in the morning the door of the diner suddenly swung open, and to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, “Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’m going to be thirty-nine.”

Her “friend” responded in a nasty tone, “So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing ‘Happy Birthday’?”

“Come on!” said the woman next to me. “Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that’s all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don’t want anything

from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the big guy behind the counter and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A smile slowly crossed his chubby face and he answered with measured delight. "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything nice and kind for her."

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about two-thirty and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake."

"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At two-thirty the next morning I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes...and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the MC of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy Birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. . .so stunned. . .so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing, "Happy birthday, dear Agnes, Happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles lit on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I. . .I mean is it okay if I kind of. . .what I want to ask you is. . .is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then looking at me she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner at Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning. But it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter, and said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning."

Harry waited a moment, then he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!" "

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Maybe what this asks of us this Lent. How can we grow in grace, as Jesus modelled all the time to those around him. And to pray and seek

to be agents of grace in the coming days of Lent, to show grace to those who may or may not deserve it, who may not be popular or wanted.

Shall we pray.