

Homily. 5th Sunday in Lent. Year.C. 6/7 April 2019.

We've all heard the saying that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. We know what this saying means; that we shouldn't find fault or condemn others when we have secrets and failings of our own; That we'd best check ourselves for our own faults and sins before we begin a crusade condemning someone else, lest our own hypocrisy and flaws are exposed bringing the sharp shards of ridicule crashing down on us.

Well, this saying comes from the events of the gospel we've just listened to. It tells us a story about a woman caught by the powerful people of her time in the very act of committing sin and breaking the law. When Jesus them asked His simple question, a question of integrity about their own purity or lack thereof, they all dropped their rocks and walked shame-faced away. Interestingly, John notes that they went from eldest to youngest. I think we're being told that the eldest and most respected, having lived longer, had more to be ashamed about than those who were younger with less life experience, though all of them had their secrets.

But, there's more going on in this story than just this message. You see, John tells us that Jesus was popular and that people were all coming to listen to Him. This made the Pharisees jealous. They were out to get Him because His words and deeds were challenging, even usurping their status, influence and authority over the people. Right from the start we learn that the motives of the accusing Pharisees were devious and self-serving.

The woman was used, too, initially by the person with whom she had adultery and then by her accusers who had been spying on her. She was a victim of their entrapment, caught in her private, less than savoury act. She was then dragged shamefully into public view being further used to try and trick Jesus into breaching the laws of the time. Her dignity was stripped from her without any care for her feelings or for her life. If Jesus had said that she ought be condemned to death as the law stated, then He would have been supporting the Pharisees and their power. If he'd said she should be let go then He would have merited death as a criminal and law breaker no better than her.

We'll never know what the doodling in the dust was about. This is a good thing because it means whatever we imagine and need it to mean. Did Jesus write down names, sins or symbols of God, or words from the scriptures? Or was He simply biding time, taking some heat out of the situation? That He bent low to the ground is important, a sign of humility and consideration before those powerful people who had the authority to judge, granting life or death. Whatever of this, His tactic and words about the one without sin throwing the first stone at her, worked. One by one, from eldest to youngest, they dropped their killing in the dust and walked away. They admitted, to themselves and to all who were gathered, that they lived in glasshouses, imperfect, sinful and ever at risk of ridicule.

In the end it was only the woman and Jesus left to sort out the future. This He did with the double edged statement; Neither do I condemn you; Go away and sin no more. Jesus didn't condemn her or get angry at her for

the way she'd been played by His opponents. At the same time He knew her guilt, challenging her to live better and not repeat the same offence. We don't know if she stuck by this chance to reform seizing the grace of mercy Jesus had won for her. All that we can do is hope she changed her choices for the better.

If we live in an illusion of righteousness and secrecy then, sooner or later, the glass ceiling will crash down on us cutting our reputation and public image to shreds; sooner or later someone will catch us in the very act of our folly and selfishness. Both the Pharisees and the woman came perilously close to this fate. Each, in their own way, was saved from their recklessness only by the wisdom, courage and patient mercy of the Lord.

One thing we do know, something worth living by, is that it's only when we face the truth about ourselves that we can really be open to the fullness of mercy and redemption, hearing Jesus deeply within us where we need His liberating words the most; Neither do I condemn you; Now go away and sin no more.