

Reflection from Revd Ali for Ash Wednesday ~ 17th February 2021

In some ways, our Gospel reading (John 8: 1 – 11) seems quite a strange one to be set for Ash Wednesday. When we think about a suitable passage, we think perhaps, about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness or one of the other stories of Jesus' early earthly ministry. And yet, I think it is quite a fitting passage for us to consider as we begin our journey through Lent.

The passage starts with a distraction. Jesus had gone to the Temple early in the morning and had begun to teach the people there. Sometime later, the scribes and Pharisees arrive with a woman who has been caught in adultery.

We don't know what the scribes and Pharisees' motivation was in bringing the woman before Jesus, but their actions certainly provide a distraction and an interruption to Jesus's ministry. The woman had been caught in adultery. A crime that, according to the law, was punishable by stoning to death. Were the scribes and Pharisees trying to trap Jesus into committing some sort of blasphemy? Or were they, to coin a modern phrase, asking themselves 'what would Jesus do?' Would he uphold the Levitical law, ignore or overturn it?

What Jesus actually does, is something entirely different.

We can only imagine the terror that the woman was experiencing. Not only had she been caught in adultery, she would probably lose her life because of it. As if to add insult to injury, she was being brought before the great teacher that everyone was talking about. As well as facing up to her sin, she also had to face humiliation, condemnation and probably even death. A terrible predicament.

But Jesus doesn't answer. He stops, and bends down, and starts writing in the sand. Nobody knows why he did that or what exactly he wrote. But I wonder if his actions were a distraction. A distraction for the Pharisees and scribes as their attention would have been diverted away from the woman. And maybe a distraction for the woman from her fear.

Jesus' response both to the woman and to the scribes and Pharisees is a response of love. Jesus does not condemn the woman but neither does he condone her actions. He offers her instead, forgiveness and a new start. When the Pharisees press Jesus for a response he says to them 'Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone' and one by one they slip away. There is no-one left to accuse the woman or witness to her sin. She is free to go and reclaim her life. To start again, having experienced mercy and forgiveness.

It is easy for us to judge the Pharisees and scribes, and yet what they did is probably something we have all done. Judging others whilst failing to see where we fall short. Jesus' response to them, as well as to the woman, was one of love. Jesus offers them the chance to reflect on and face up to their own sin. An opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness. A fresh start for them as well.

Out of love, Jesus offers the woman and the scribes and Pharisees that precious gift of repentance and forgiveness. The opportunity of turning away from what they have done wrong, facing in a new direction and starting their lives over again with the slate wiped clean. He also offers them the chance of a new journey - away from their old lives and into new lives focussed on the God of love.

Out of love, God invites us this Lent to enter into that same new journey. To turn away from the things that would distract us and to focus on our relationship with God. Traditionally, we might think about by giving something up or doing something extra. A Lenten discipline. In this time of pandemic, we have already given up so much. Time with our family and friends. Time at work or at play. So maybe this year we might think of other ways to mark this season. However we choose to enter into Lent, our ultimate focus is on journeying with Jesus to the Cross. Using this

time to experience with Jesus the loneliness and temptations of the wilderness, the betrayal, the accusations, the pain of Good Friday, the emptiness of Easter Saturday. So that we can fully enter into the joy of the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Sometimes, because we know how the story ends, it can be difficult to enter into that sense of journey towards the crucifixion. So maybe setting aside some time each day, perhaps to read through one of the Gospels, or some time to draw closer to God in prayer, that sense of journey will be experienced and to feel afresh the awe and wonder of the gifts that we are all offered through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In a moment there will be the opportunity for you to make the sign of the cross in ash on your forehead. An outward sign of that inward journey. Taking the time to turn away from our sins and turn instead towards love. The love that was offered to the woman caught in adultery. The love that was offered to the scribes and the Pharisees. The love that was offered on the cross.

The love of God through Jesus Christ that is offered to each and every one of us afresh every day.

Amen.

Note: If I was preaching on this passage in 'normal circumstances' I would take some time to explore the role of the man caught in the adulterous act – and I look forward to exploring that with you when this reading is again on the lectionary.