

SERMON AT MASS FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT 1995.

Today's Gospel reading is odd.

It's certainly not part of John's Gospel.

It only appears in one of the ancient documents.

It's more likely to be by Luke: it's in his style and consistent with the main drift of his witness to the teaching of Jesus.

The woman is found in the very act of committing adultery.

Even in the first century the death penalty was a possibility for this offence.

Women were treated as the possession of the primary male in their lives.

Thus the act was a violation of property, and interference with a man's line of succession, and Deuteronomy and Leviticus prescribe the death penalty for both parties.

What the people who brought the woman to Jesus wanted was for him to join them in condemning this breach of the Law and to sanction the stoning.

Jesus refuses to give them an accusation to use against him.

'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.'

The eldest of the scribes and Pharisees begin to drift away.

They know that none of them is qualified on those grounds to begin the execution.

Eventually Jesus is left alone with the woman.

'Woman,' he says, straightening up, 'where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.'

No one, then, is qualified, by her or his own righteousness to condemn another.

For judged by the standard of God's absolute holiness everyone is an adulterer and worthy of death.

We all need the divine forgiveness which Jesus brings.

Jesus comes not to condemn the world but to save it.

Is this what lies at the heart of our life together?

Do we carry on the work of Jesus in proclaiming the forgiveness of sins?

Or are we like the scribes and the Pharisees, waiting for a person to fall from grace so that we can denounce them?

But we are all in the same boat: all sinners, loved by God, not condemned by him.

And it really is none of our business how much worse than us others are.

None of our business to pronounce on other people's status in relation either to the law of the land or to some biblical precept, real or imagined.

Recognising that they are actually loved is a lifetime's work for some people.

They don't need people in the Church to tell them how bad they are: they already know.

The rest of us need to come to terms with the fact that God loves us too.

It is easy to take refuge in the Law.

But in the end what is required of us is the recognition that **we** cannot contain God's love.

It's free.

The austerity of Lent leads to the heart and centre of the tradition that we have received, and we are given space and time to move right into that heart.

And to see that at the end of it all there is the final, definitive statement of how we stand with God.

The last word.

It is a man dying on a cross.

Dying out of love for the whole of humanity, regardless of people's worthiness.

I cannot think of any other reason for being a christian except that I can gradually come to terms with the extent of God's love for me, a sinner.

I hope I don't presume on that love, but that I am constantly bowled over by it.

I'm not convinced that I have earned this, nor that I can, for it is a gift.

A universal gift, made to all who are made in God's image.

You see, there is this great temptation to suggest, to believe that God loves us, yes, but to the exclusion of some others.

The most offensive thing is to be told that God loves every human creature, regardless of condition.

The divine forgiveness brought by Jesus affirms that yes, God loves sinners, and he shows this by welcoming them and eating with them.

The Church has to live this out, proclaim it.

Proclaim it loudly.

Because for too long people have believed, and we have let them, that christianity is about the pursuit of righteousness, when it is really about accepting the free grace, the overflowing love of God.

We have to live as forgiven sinners.

And in order to do that we have to cease condemning others.

What a task that is!

We have to proclaim a God who loves insanely, indiscriminately.

This is the heart of the Gospel.

Are we faithful to it?

At every eucharist, when the Gospel is proclaimed, that is an encounter with the risen, living Christ.

There's no other reason why we make such a fuss of it, carrying the book in, perhaps holding candles and incense by it and kissing the book at the end.

Christ himself, not just our common interest or social concern forms this community, because he is with us, in us.

As we draw nearer to the sacred three days of the celebration of the passing over of Jesus from life to death, we have time to let his magnetism take hold of us again.

To be drawn to the cross, where the full extent of God's love is seen, is to return to the heart and centre of why we are here as a church at all.

To return there is to begin to realise what sort of God it is who created us and who calls us to love and serve him now.

If we recognise that it is reconciliation and not condemnation that awaits us, then perhaps we shall begin with enthusiasm to share that news with others.