

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Passion Sunday

April 3, 2022

**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore Street

Scranton, PA 18508

John 8:1-11

The Gospel passage we just heard is one of the most famous in the entire Bible, and we are all grateful for the outcome, as the woman caught in adultery is spared from being stoned to death. But the incident itself was contrived because, St. John tells us, Jesus' enemies posed the question in order "*...to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.*" Those who contrived this set-up were obviously unserious about the application of the Law, we know, because they didn't bother to bring along the man with whom the woman had been guilty. He was supposed to be stoned too, according to Leviticus 20:10, which says, "*both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.*"

Thus, the scribes and Pharisees want to see if Jesus will transgress the Law or perhaps even redefine sin and pronounce that one of the Ten Commandments no longer applies. He does neither, but begins by writing with his fingers on the ground. So what we see is Jesus, whom St. John identifies as the Word of God, writing words. In doing so, He reminds His hearers that day and us who observe Him two thousand years later that He, as the Word of God, is the author of the very verses they are referencing. They are, thus, asking Jesus to deny Himself, or seeing if He will deny Himself, by setting this trap.

Jesus, of course, outwits them by shining the light on them and showing us how the woman caught in act of adultery is not the only person He has spared from the sentence of death that she deserved. He says, "*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Hence, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, "*Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.*" They all left because they, too, were guilty of sins for which the law prescribed death.

This same reality applies to us, as well. Without beating ourselves up or doubting for a second that we have been forgiven for the sins of our past life, because we have been absolved in the confessional in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we can nevertheless remember offenses we have committed that the law says we should be punished for with death. Yet here we are, present at Mass, the Lord not having imposed the very sentence He pronounced. Here am I, a former Protestant and heretic, celebrating Mass on your behalf. What we all deserve and what we get are different, not just for the woman and those who caught her and had slinked away in their humiliation; but for us as well.

So why was she spared? Why indeed did Jesus spare the guilty ones who were ready to stone the adulteress? Why have we been spared if we are likewise guilty? We are not spared because we don't deserve death. We know this because every time we wait on our knees for communion at the altar rail, we are saying, "I deserve death." Neither is it because sin has been redefined and anything goes, as if Jesus were not the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We get a clue, actually, from the Epistle we just heard, and here I mean more by who wrote it than by what is said in it. The author of the Letter to the Philippians was St. Paul, the man responsible for the murder of the Church's first martyr, St. Stephen. Though St. Paul was guilty of a crime that deserved death, the Lord spared him that he might become the Church's preeminent Apostle to the Gentiles. He was spared in order that he might fulfill his mission, given by God uniquely to him.

This mercy is implied in Jesus' last words to the woman: "*Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.*" The part about not condemning and not sinning again are obvious enough. After all, she is standing before Jesus alive, and the Lord of heaven and earth is not about to condone her wickedness, to treat mortal sin as if it were no threat to her eternal salvation. What we often miss is the shortest part of the sentence, where Jesus says, "*Go.*" Herein we are reminded that she, too, like St. Paul, had a particular mission from God that she was not fulfilling as she wasted her God-given talents and precious time through sin. Jesus was giving her a commission to get to work, telling her that she was imperiling her soul not only by what she did by her adultery, but by her sins of omission, what she had left undone. She was spared so that she could fulfill her life's purpose, unique to her alone.

We must understand God's mercy towards the scribes and Pharisees, towards St. Paul and towards us in the same way. When at the end of Mass each week I dismiss you with the words, "Go in peace," I echo the Lord's words to the woman caught in the act of adultery. I say to you, guilty sinners who have been forgiven for sins deserving of death, that you are to go forth into the world and complete the job you've been given, jobs unique to each and every one of you. God's mercy is such that it not only wells up to eternal life, by which we are spared the fires of hell. That is mercy enough, but that same mercy also gives us a second chance while we still walk the earth, the chance to discern in God's forgiveness the very reason we were brought into this world. The Lord loves us so much that sin only has the last word if we make it so. When it's up to God, we see the patient compassion that prompts us to turn from our wickedness and live, and, in doing so, in using our unique gifts, we help others to learn Love, too.