

Homily Lent 5C: 16 Mar 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

One of the interesting features of John's gospel is the presence of so many anonymous characters: the newlyweds of Cana, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind. Lazarus is one of the few beneficiaries of a miracle who gets named. Today's brief passage is a case in point. The woman caught in the act of adultery is never identified; only later did some readers try to identify her as Mary Magdalene, and this attribution is not certain. This anonymity is an invitation to place ourselves in the shoes of the nameless character, to try to imagine that we are the ones who need enlightenment, healing, forgiveness.

I think it not difficult to identify w/ the character in question. We are not unlike this unfortunate woman. I suspect many of us have had the heartrending experience of being caught red-handed in the act of transgressing. We were tempted, we sinned, and there's no evading the fact. There are feelings of guilt, sorrow and remorse. Like Adam and Eve we simply want to run and hide from God and everyone else so that no one can see our shame.

John's account of being caught in the act is dramatized by the threat of capital punishment. The Law of Moses imposed the severest punishment for adultery. It seems harsh to contemporary sensibilities. Even by Jesus' day, the law was a dead letter: under Roman law, only the Roman authorities like Pilate could impose the death penalty. So the question posed by the religious authorities was a trap: if Jesus said the woman should be stoned, he was guilty of trespassing the Roman Law; if he said no, he was guilty of trespassing the Jewish Law.

The Lord's response is to reframe the whole dilemma against the broader backdrop of universal human sinfulness: let the one w/o sin be the first to cast a stone, he says. All sin was punishable by death. That was the primordial penalty inflicted by God on Adam and Eve and their offspring for their disobedience. So the woman was not the only one guilty of a capital crime, as it were. Both she and her accusers stood in the dock, guilty, condemned, awaiting execution of the death sentence. It was only a matter of time.

There are a couple lessons to be drawn.

First, in her encounter w/ Jesus, the woman finds mercy, forgiveness and new life. He is the one w/o sin who could condemn. But he has come into the world not to condemn, but to save. This beautiful moment of new life for the woman is what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about. In this sacrament, penitents confess their sins and receive pardon and absolution. They gain a new lease on life as Christ's disciples. Confession is a chance to meet Jesus and receive forgiveness. This cleansing dynamic of confession, absolution, and spiritual rejuvenation is something we all need to experience, most of us more often.

Second, in the encounter w/ Jesus, the community of accusers is disarmed. The Lord summons these men to examine their own consciences and see if they be so simple as to be justified in condemning. They walk away, beginning w/ the elders; probably the elders were wiser, richer in self-knowledge, and more aware of their own sins. I feel our Church could benefit from this sort of Jesus encounter. There are many divisions in our community, much unconstructive criticism of other groups in the Church, many figurative stones being cast back and forth. Papal elections have a tendency of bringing these tensions to the fore. A deeper examination of our consciences should lead to a more honest appreciation of our own faults, of the fact that we too stand under the sentence of death for our transgressions, of our need for mercy and forgiveness. This sort of exercise, if repeated w/ sincere heart on a regular basis, can be transformative and renewing. Growth in self-knowledge and humility can make us more patient w/ our fellow sinners in God's house, and help us become effective agents of peace and reconciliation in the faith community. Let's pray that the remaining days of this holy season of Lent may move us to contrition for our own sins and forgiveness for those of our brothers and sisters.