

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent [C] (April 6-2025)

Readings:-Is 43:16-21; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Reminding us of God's readiness to forgive sin, give the sinner a second chance, bind up broken lives, and restore people to His friendship, today's readings challenge us to show the same mercy to the sinners around us and to live as forgiven people, actively seeking reconciliation with God and one another. The central theme of all three readings is about the steadfast love of a merciful God. The readings remind us that we should not be self-righteous and condemn the lives of others when God is calling them tenderly to conversion.

Mother Teresa on the Sacrament of Divine Mercy: While Mother Teresa is certainly famous for the charity with which she poured herself out in love for Christ in the distressing disguise of lepers, AIDS victims, the dying, and the untouchables, she was likewise a great "Missionary of Mercy" in calling everyone to receive Jesus' forgiving love in the Sacrament of Confession, a Sacrament she received at least once a week. She would counsel others, "One thing is necessary for us: Confession. Confession is nothing but humility in action. We call it Penance, but really it is a Sacrament of Love, a Sacrament of forgiveness. It is a place where I allow Jesus to take away from me everything that divides, that destroys. Confession is a beautiful act of great love. Only in confession can we go in as sinners with sin and come out as sinners without sin. ... There's no need for us to despair, no need for us to commit suicide, no need for us to be discouraged, if we have understood the tenderness of God's love." — She said elsewhere, very simply, "Confession is Jesus and I, and nobody else." And then she told us, "Remember this for life."

The summary of the teachings from the scripture readings : Explaining how a merciful God forgives the sins of His chosen people and leads them back from the Babylonian exile, the first reading reminds us that we too are forgiven, and we are saved from our own sinfulness. In the second reading, Paul presents himself as a forgiven sinner who has been completely transformed by his Faith in Christ Jesus. His life is an example of the Gospel exhortation, "*Sin no more.*" Paul loves Christ so much he wants to share in His sufferings and even in His death so that he may share Christ's Resurrection. The sinful woman's story of sin committed and sin forgiven in today's Gospel, shows the inexhaustible mercy and compassion Jesus offers to repentant sinners. In addition, by making sin lessens the condition for throwing the first stone, Jesus forces the accusers to assess their own souls and to leave. Thus, He grants justice to the accusers and mercy to the sinful woman. In our own lives, we bear witness to the Justice of God by confessing our sinfulness and resolving to avoid sin, and we bear witness to God's Mercy by accepting the forgiveness of our sins and promising to forgive those who have offended us.

Important messages for our life: - # 1: We need to become forgiving people, ready for reconciliation: Jesus has shown inexhaustible mercy and compassion to sinners by dying for our sins. But we are often self-righteous, like the Pharisees, and ready to spread scandal about others with a bit of spicy gossip. We are judgmental about the unmarried mother, the alcoholic, the drug addict, or the shoplifter, ignoring Jesus' command: "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Let us learn to acknowledge our sins, ask God's forgiveness every day and extend the same forgiveness to our erring brothers and sisters. We need to learn to hate the sin but love the sinners, showing them Jesus' compassion and working with the Holy Spirit to make our own lives exemplary so that we can help lead them to Jesus' ways.

2) We have no right to judge others: We have no right to judge others because we often commit the very faults we condemn, we are often partial and prejudiced in our judgments, and we do not know the circumstances which have led someone to sin. Hence, let us leave the judgment to our merciful God Who does read people's hearts. We should show mercy and compassion to those who sin because we ourselves are sinners in need of God's forgiveness. The apostle Paul reminds us: "*But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.*" (1 Cor 11:31).

Gospel exegesis: Text omitted by ancient manuscripts: This powerful narrative of Jesus and the accused woman is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts of John, but appears in other important manuscripts after Lk 21:38. Almost all scholars today recognize that this text was not originally part of John's Gospel—but it was obviously such an important story from the life of Jesus that the early Christians wanted to ensure it was not lost, even if they weren't entirely sure of where to place it. It seems to have much more in common with Luke's Gospel, and it is very possible that it is a fragment from one of Luke's sources. This account is undeniably rich in theological and moral significance, and in psychological and human drama. Still, early Church authors, such as Papias (ca. A.D. 120) and the author of the Syriac "*Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*" (3rd cent.), knew of such an incident, and Jerome included it in his translation. For these reasons the story is judged canonical by Catholics. It might have been omitted in some early rigorist traditions because the early Church, in its struggle to maintain strict penitential discipline, perhaps could not deal with the ease with which Jesus forgave the woman. In this episode Jesus seemed too "soft" on sin. Perhaps for this reason, the story was temporarily set aside by the early Church and was only later granted canonical approbation.

The context and the trap: The incident happened in Jerusalem, in the precincts of the Temple where Jesus had been teaching. ["The scribes and the Pharisees" is often a stock phrase in the Gospels for "those Jews who disagreed with Jesus and opposed him."] The scribes were a group of people with special

training in Scripture and in the interpretation of Jewish law. They were also called lawyers or theologians and most of them were Pharisees. [The Pharisees were members of a lay movement that sought to extend God's reign into every aspect of a person's day.] The scribes and Pharisees brought forward a woman caught in the act of adultery. It was a pitiful, heart-wrenching scenario, calculated to cause her ultimate shame. The Mosaic penalty for such an offense was death by stoning, although there is no evidence that this ever took place, certainly not in Roman times. Besides, Moses commanded that both partners in adultery should be stoned, not only the woman. (Lv 20:10; Dt 22:22). Stoning was mostly done in cases of blasphemy; such was the case with Stephen, whom we read about in the book of Acts. The Jewish civil and criminal code considered three grave sins as punishable by death, namely idolatry, murder, and adultery. Deuteronomy prescribes death by strangulation for a married woman caught in adultery. If the guilty woman is betrothed, she has to be stoned. In both cases they have violated God's sixth commandment and have destroyed the fidelity and unity of marriage. "It is a terrible thing for a sinner to fall into the hands of his fellow sinners." (F. B. Meyer). His opponents wanted to use the occasion to embarrass Jesus, because he had the reputation of proclaiming God's mercy toward sinners. If he insisted on following the Law exactly, his reputation as a prophet of God's mercy would be open to question. Besides, if Jesus consented to her death by strangulation or stoning, he would be violating the Roman law, which forbade killing by private citizens. If he took the side of the adulterous woman, he was open to the charge of ignoring God's Law and God's Justice as given by Moses. This was the ingenious trap they had set for Jesus.

Jesus' fair verdict: Initially, Jesus showed his lack of interest in the case by simply writing on the ground. But he was the only one in the group who could rightly judge the woman. The woman waited to hear Jesus' verdict. She knew that she was guilty. She had passed the judgment on herself, and she accepted Jesus' right to do the same. Perfectly understanding the secret intentions of her self-righteous accusers and the helplessness of the repentant sinner, Jesus gave his verdict: "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Jesus confronts their self-righteousness with a demand that they first examine their own consciences before they accuse another. Thus, he turned the accusers' attention back on themselves and made them realize that they, too, were sinners. St. Augustine puts Jesus' stand as follows: "Let this woman be punished, but not by sinners; let the law be applied, but not by its transgressors." Thus, Jesus ingeniously escaped from the trap by leaving the judgment to the consciences of the accusers. This reduced the accusers to silence, prompting them to leave in shame. According to Jewish custom, in the absence of eyewitnesses, the eldest should have begun the stoning, and since stoning was work, it was forbidden on a Sabbath day according to Mosaic Law and stoning one to death was a violation of Roman law. So, the accusers melted away, beginning with the elders, who, like the elders in the story of

Susannah (Dn 13), had probably brought the charge. Since the elders left scene first followed by youngsters the case against the woman was dismissed. By appealing to the Justice of God and the injustice of humans, Jesus upheld God's mercy. The moral of the story is not that sin is of no importance, or that God does not punish sin, but that God extends mercy to repentant sinners in order that they may turn from their sins.

Jesus keeps scribbling in the sand: The response of Jesus was a symbolic action. According to the Gospel writer: "*Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger*" (Jn 8:6). This parabolic act is probably an allusion to Jer 17:3: "*Those who turn away from thee shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.*" If so, Jesus' writing on the ground is an indirect reminder of the "guilt" of those who were condemning the adulterous woman. Jesus is saying that he will not permit the Law to be manipulated by the Pharisees to condemn those they label as sinners, when the hypocritical condemners themselves are also sinners. Thus, just as the scribbling of Jesus that was written on the ground or in the sand will disappear with the wind and rain and be forgotten, so will the sins that God has forgiven disappear and be forgotten.

Jesus's counter trap on the accusers: All the accusers left the scene because they realized that Jesus' statement challenging those without sin to cast the first stone. Why? 1) It was a Sabbath day and stoning someone to death was a form of work and all sorts of work was forbidden on the Sabbath. 2) According to Mosaic Law only the eyewitnesses were allowed to cast the first stones and none came forward as eyewitnesses. 3) Moses commanded in Lev 20: 10 and Dt 22: 22 that both partners in the adultery should be stoned and the accusers did not bring the man. 4) The Roman law did not allow anyone to stone someone to death as the death penalty was reserved to Rome. 5) Jesus' writing on the loose sand was a prophetic gesture accusing them of their own sins. St. Augustine clarifies Jesus' stand: "Let the Law be applied; but not by transgressors."

Judgment with a stern warning: Since Jesus knew that her sin was a violation of the sixth commandment, "*You shall not commit adultery,*" he gave the woman the strong warning, "*Go, and from now on, do not sin anymore.*" Jesus did not shrink from calling her deed a sin, inappropriate and offensive to the Justice of God. He forgave the sinner, but he upheld the Justice of God by not excusing or explaining away the sin. Without minimizing her sinfulness, Jesus showed the sinner the respect she deserved as a human being, treating her with compassion. Clearly, he valued repentance and conversion more than simple reprisal. Not only did Jesus not condemn the woman, he also gave her hope for the future. Jesus is thus portrayed as a living expression of the Divine Mercy, a wise and kind judge, more concerned with forgiveness and rehabilitation than

with punishment and death. St. Augustine captures this scene with his apt remark: *relicti sunt duo miseria et misericordia* (“There are but two left: misery and mercy”). Her story of sin committed, and sin forgiven is an example of the inexhaustible mercy and compassion shown by Jesus to sinners. When we repent and express sorrow for our sins Jesus will say “*Neither will I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*” Jesus’ answer is somewhat ambiguous, and it is perhaps because it was considered “soft” on sexual immorality that some Christian communities might have hesitated to incorporate this particular story into their New Testaments. But Jesus does tell her “not to sin again,” which certainly implies that her behavior was, in fact, sinful; He does not excuse the fact of the sin, or deny its wrongness, but He chooses not to dwell on it, knowing that the entire experience has been more than traumatic enough.

Story of Divine mercy: God imposed the death penalty in the Old Testament for all types of serious sins: for idolatry, murder, blasphemy, using the Lord’s name in vain, profaning the Sabbath, cursing or striking father and mother, kidnapping, and several sexual sins (see Ex 19, 21, 22, 31, 35 and Lv 20). The Church still teaches that there is *still* a “death penalty,” an eternal death penalty, associated with such grave sins. That is why we call this type of sin “mortal,” or “deadly.” When we commit such an act with full knowledge and deliberate consent, we die spiritually, we commit spiritual suicide, and we cause definitive self-separation from God. When we understand why the death penalty is just for such sins, we will appreciate in its depth God’s merciful love on the Cross. Besides, God Himself revealed, especially through the Prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel that *every sin is an act of adultery* because it is being unfaithful to the spousal covenant of love we have entered into with God (see Jer 3:20, Is 1:21, Is 57:8, Hos 2:2-5, Hos 3:1-5, Hos 9:1, Ez 16:30). Hence, the story of the woman caught in adultery helps us recognize and receive the immensity of God’s mercy. That is why Pope Francis in his first Sunday homily as Pope declared: “God never tires of forgiving us.... It’s we who tire of asking for forgiveness.” Then he prayed, “May we never tire of asking for what God never tires to give!” According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, home is the first Christian school where one learns love and repeated forgiveness (CCC #1657), based on the loving mercy of God. The gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin. There is no sin, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive (CCC #982).

JOKES OF THE WEEK:- 1) Pastor and Farmer: “Do you smoke, drink or curse?” The pastor asked the old farmer. It was a hesitant, “Well, every once in a while.” “You know, John, I don’t smoke, drink, or curse...” “Yes, sure, pastor, but you don’t farm either...!”

2) Gary Dearing told a story about his Air Force Colonel, who served as inspector general of his command, and paid particular attention to how the personnel wore their uniforms. “On one occasion the Colonel spotted a junior

airman with a violation. 'Airman,' he bellowed, 'what do you do when a shirt pocket is unbuttoned?' The startled airman replied, 'Button it, sir!' The Colonel looked him in the eye and said, 'Well?' At that, the airman nervously reached over and buttoned the Colonel's shirt pocket."

Additional anecdotes:- 1) **Ann Landers**: Some time ago a lady wrote to the famous advice columnist Ann Landers and asked this question, "Do all men cheat on their wives? I have been suspicious of my husband for some time. I even hired a private detective to trail him, but he couldn't come up with a thing. I went to a lawyer. He told me to grow up and accept the fact that all husbands fool around. Do they?" Ann Landers very wisely replied, "No. There are plenty of married men who never cheat, and your husband could be one of them. The only thing you can be fairly sure of is that your lawyer cheats on his wife." — Cheating on one's wife or husband is called adultery in the Bible. It is prohibited by the Sixth Commandment.

2) **The Scarlet Letter**: In 1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne published ***The Scarlet Letter***. Its setting was a Puritan community in Boston in early New England. Hawthorne's novel tells the story of Hester Prynne who was forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" for "adultery" because she had given birth to an illegitimate child and refused to name the father. The child's father was none other than the community's minister, Arthur **Dimmesdale**. Hester bore the letter, the public scorn and the humiliation alone, while the minister had merely to bear the pangs of conscience. After many years, the minister finally confessed his secret sin to the people and later died in peace. Hester continued to wear her letter, and went on to live like a saint bringing happiness to her disturbed illegitimate daughter and helping others in their troubles. The townsfolk said the letter stood, not for Adultery as it had done but now for Able, and a sign of honour. — *The Scarlet Letter* has some similarities with today's Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery.

03"Christ said, 'I don't remember.'" In his book, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, Ron Lee Davis tells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years ago. He had repented but still had no peace about it. In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ. The priest, however, was sceptical about that. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, ask him what sin I committed while I was in the high school." The woman agreed. A few days later the priest asked, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did," she replied. "And did you ask him what sin I committed? — She smiled and answered, "Christ said, 'I don't remember.' "