

## April 7, 2019

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

It is so easy to judge. It's so easy to assign blame to someone and then to decide what their punishment should be. This is increasingly popular in our world. Everything is taken as black and white - someone said you did it, so you did it, now off to punishment. In the Gospel we see such a case. Several people have accused this woman and they demand the maximum sentence to be carried out immediately. Although this sort of scene plays itself out in our world on a daily basis, it really is not in line with our judicial system that is supposed to presume innocence, and allows the accuser to speak - and much more importantly - it does not take into consideration the concept of justice flowing from God who is the source of all true justice. Only Jesus seems to question the situation. Only Jesus considers the reasonableness of the sentence being imposed. Only Jesus tries to lead this group of sinners back to their God.

The people in the story bring the woman who has been caught in the act of adultery. They take this case to Jesus not out of interests for justice - but to trip him up. Their question really gives Jesus two alternatives: Stone her to death, or let her go. If he says "let her go" then he can be accused of violating the law of Moses which prescribes this punishment for this crime - they can then use this to discredit him with the Jewish people. If he agrees with the stoning then they can discredit him for violating his own principles of mercy, and can take him to the Roman authorities for participating in an execution (under Roman law it was forbidden for the Jewish people to carry out their own executions). Tidy little black and white choice for him to make - both ways he loses.

Jesus looks to the gray area in this situation (who are these people and what are they up to?) and he looks to the accused (who is she?, what is the full story?). He starts to write on the ground with his finger. Some say he was just giving them time to think and slow down the momentum of the crowd, others say that he was writing down the sins of the people for their reflection, others think that he was showing himself to be the divine lawgiver - bringing up the image of God who carved the ten commandments on stone tablets with his finger. In any case he stopped this high speed trip to execution, and poses an interesting challenge: *Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* Then he goes back to writing.

This is a very interesting statement since those who were the witnesses the act would be expected to throw the first stones. If they throw the stone then they too will be answerable to the

Roman authorities, and if they don't throw the stone they may be suspected of lying in their testimony which would be a crime under Jewish law and a sin before God. This whole thing is not about respect for the law of Moses, or doing the right thing - it's about taking down an opponent using this woman and her life as mere instruments - this is not justice. The older and wiser get the message first and seeing their own guilt, or recognizing the false court they were witnessing - leave. Jesus lets them leave without penalty, and later he lets the woman leave. He forgives them for their act, and her for hers. But Christian forgiveness is not just tolerance for whatever someone does, or looking the other way when wrong has been done - this is also not justice. But it calls for a constructive response and looks to the future. Jesus tells the woman: *Go, and from now on do not sin any more.* In His love, he forgives the sinner, but does not excuse the sin, his goal is to direct her to the path that leads to something more.

We heard in the first reading God say: *I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself.* God is not there to either punish crime or to let people off from their crimes (this is too black and white for God). God meets us in our sin and provides instruction to us through our conscience, through the Church and through the situations of our life. Any time we are caught in the consequences of our actions, and also, any time we get off when we deserved to get punished - God is acting. Acting to nourish us and bring us to that final peace in heaven. To follow Jesus to this place is what really matters - this is what Paul means when he says *I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* All the things which we gain in life, all the things we think we accomplished by punishing others, means nothing - to follow Jesus is the only thing that makes the events of our lives get us anywhere. This Gospel story is not just about fairness, or not being judgmental, or recognizing our own guilt - it is also about what happens after these people walk away - and what they do with what Jesus gave them.

So often we are so quick to judge, so quick to pass sentence, so quick to be the witness who throws the first stone. But we forget that we have our own guilt, we forget that to throw that stone without knowing the full story puts us in the wrong too. Rather than focusing on the sins of others let us seek not to accuse them but to guide them back to the Lord. Rather than professing our own innocence in the face of criticism let us be aware of the forgiveness God has given us when we have sinned. Then we can run the race that Paul is calling us to when he says *forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal ... in Christ Jesus.*