

Ash Weds Sermon NW: I wonder if you've had a chance to choose what kind of Lenten discipline you're going to engage in over the next few weeks? I've chosen to read a rather large book which will engage me in the discipline of spiritual reading more than I usually give time to. It's a book by John Stott, called the Cross of Christ, and it's mostly concerned with theories of atonement. I think once a Priest has shared with their congregation what their Lenten discipline is, it becomes an accountable discipline - because I know that some of you, after Easter, are going to be asking me to tell you something about the book! So that will keep me on track!

The Gospel story we've just heard tells us quite a bit about accountability, but it also points us to some important thoughts on the spiritual disciplines and principles of the Christian faith: forgiveness, truth, reconciliation, as well as addressing assumptions, accusations, gossip, and pointing the finger at someone for their wrong-doing.

All of these are as tricky for us to deal with today as they were back in the days of Jesus and way back of course much further than that: they are inherent issues to the entire human race and always have been.

Just for a moment, I invite you to ponder and reflect. I wonder, thinking about this Gospel story, I wonder with who in that story you might most closely associate yourself with? Maybe someone in the crowd, one of those many people who'd gathered in the Temple that day to hear Jesus speaking and teaching and oblivious as to what was about to publically unfold? May be you identify with one of the leaders who were there - so, someone in authority, not just from within religious circles, but may be in your own secular organisation - someone who others would look to with respect in your place of work or in your community.

May be there's just a very small part of you which identifies with the woman herself, the one allegedly caught in sin? Or maybe you might even associate with the one who wasn't actually present, but surely who'd played a central part in this story - the one that the woman had been found with, the one who seemingly got away from it all, managing to remain un-blamed and inconspicuous - and not brought into the public eye?

I wonder whether any of us thought that the one we most closely associate with in this story is in fact Jesus?

The underlying message in this story which Jesus conveys so skilfully to the crowd of onlookers is the message of forgiveness. No one, not one single person in that crowd, was able to justify punishing the woman after Jesus had confronted them about their own sinfulness: *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,*' Jesus said.

And so it is that this Gospel story I think becomes intensely about us - it's all about ourselves and our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Instead of the finger being pointed at the woman, with public disgrace and humiliation, we find that instead we're invited - perhaps even required by Jesus - to point our finger at ourselves instead, to point to our own minds, our own hearts, our own innermost thoughts and to our reactions and actions.

As we point inwards towards the self, confronting our own mistakes and sinfulness, asking for God's help and receiving his forgiveness, we're then freed up and enabled to face outwards; to reach outwards, not to blame - but to assist, with empathy and compassion. Isaiah expresses this well, as we heard read - saying that 'if we avoid pointing the finger and speaking evil' then 'our hands are free to give food to the hungry and to help the afflicted'. If our hands and minds are busy finding fault with others then we're too occupied with that to even perhaps notice the

real needs of those around us. And Isaiah goes on with reminding us, if we're able to do this, of this beautiful spiritual reward: then, your 'light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday'.

I love those words as we imagine shifting our focus away from dwelling on the faults of others and instead learning how to serve them well. This is all about a spiritual shift in our own perspectives – a focussing on what is far more important – which is of course that people know they are loved.

The biblical teacher Oswald Chambers describes this personal need for our own sanctification, our being made holy, being made more Christ like: and trying to achieve this by an intense effort at concentrating on God's point of view – and perhaps this is something we can try to aspire to this Lent, – allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us so that we begin to see God's perspective, instead of

our own. Jesus in the temple that day brought God's perspective right into the midst of a pending crisis – no doubt the stoning of the woman would have followed had Jesus not been present.

If we're able to do what Jesus did, in that moment, when his own reactions and actions were surely being tested in the most demanding of ways by the Jewish leaders, then we might notice that the first thing he did was to stop. We can imagine the silence falling in the Temple that day, the dust settling, as everyone watched and waited to see what Jesus would do next. And Jesus, instead of responding in haste, so typically for him, does the unexpected, with that upturning of people's expectations as he revealed something about the presence of the kingdom of God. It is only after a short time of quiet has passed, and after he has knelt down in the dust and drawn or marked out something, that he begins to speak.

In that bending or kneeling down, it is almost as though he becomes one of us, a human soul, vulnerable, lowly, empathising with the pain and disgrace and dismay of the woman in front of him. But then he stands and raises up to his full stature, to express the question of truth and mercy. In this gesture, Jesus has, as he did so often in his ministry, drawn close in to the pain and distress of the sinner, yet in rising up identifies with the dignity of the divine – fully human, and fully God – with empathy, compassion and understanding, yet with the mercy, kindness and authority of God to forgive.

Not only does he then repeat the action of bending down again as if in deep empathy, but as the crowd disperses he's then left alone with the woman, a breach of cultural boundaries yet giving opportunity for yet deeper work of reconciliation: Because then, Jesus, once again raised up and standing next to the woman, conveys those most important words for her to hear, but in private: don't sin again.

Lent is frequently concerned with our innermost thoughts and feelings. This is a time when we can withdraw if we choose, into our own place of quiet and stillness, our own desert, or wilderness, to contemplate our own shortcomings, to bring them before God, and to seek his forgiveness. As we're forgiven, we become freed up, to help us in not pointing the finger at others but instead opening our hands and hearts towards them.

We're called to be Christ-like, and so in theory in our Gospel story I wonder whether we can most closely associate with Jesus - the one who showed deep compassion, and courage and wisdom. As we journey through these next few weeks of Lent, may those spiritual disciplines be at the heart of all that we do, all that we say, and all that we offer to others. Amen.