

John 8.1-11

Bede Griffiths 'Return to the centre'. Chapter 6, Sin and redemption

Sin is a failure of love, a failure to respond to the movement of grace which is ever drawing us out of ourselves into the divine light. When we refuse to respond, to acknowledge our own nothingness and need, then we close in on ourselves, we become separated from God and eternal life, and we see ourselves as separate selves, each shut up in ourselves and in conflict with others.' (p.47)

I wonder who you identify with in this gospel story we have just heard.

- The woman, who has been caught committing a grave sin and is being dragged in front of Jesus and the crowds?
- The Pharisees and scribes, who like to maintain religious order, but here are also trying to expose Jesus
- Jesus, whose mission is to show his contemporaries that God is love, full of compassion and mercy, longing for his children to live in love, to know healing and the fullness of life.

Perhaps it is the woman. Perhaps, we, too, have committed a grave sin at some point in our lives, that has left us with a feeling of guilt struggling to accept forgiveness. Or, we grew up with a sense of guilt and shame, feeling we weren't quite good enough ...whatever it is, the experience of carrying guilt is not limited to having committed an act like adultery. And sometimes, we find ourselves in a place where we might have been told 'God forgives you', but we can't forgive ourselves ...and therefore can't accept God's forgiveness. And, yet, God knows the depth our hearts, with all our weakness and hardness. And God offers forgiveness and healing to all who seek it.

We know nothing about this woman's story, what drove her to commit adultery, what her circumstances are. What we do know is that she was in this

terrible place, facing the Pharisees, scribes, bystanders and Jesus, full of shame, guilt and fear..including the fear of being stoned to death.

'Woman, where are they? Has anyone condemned you? Jesus asks her, making contact with her, enabling her to speak.

'No one 'she replied.

'Neither do I condemn you, said Jesus, 'Go and sin no more'.

We are left to guess and imagine the woman's reaction after these words of Jesus. Did she feel disbelief, huge relief? What next? We hope her husband witnessed the scene and was also able to learn from it.

How about the Pharisees and Scribes? Perhaps it's easier to identify with them? After all, they are dedicated religious people who try and ensure people live honourably and observe the law. Yes, they are trying to catch out Jesus, but he has been preaching all this stuff about justice for the poor and fullness of life to all; he was beginning to endanger the fragile stability of Jerusalem by allowing people to think he might be the Messiah.

We, in our time, may not be keen on people who come with radical ideas – for example in relation to preserving the environment, or critically looking at our economic systems, asking if these systems are really for the common good of all, suggesting radical changes in our life-style. If we think of these religious leaders as people who did not want to rock the boat, we may be able to relate to that. How much was the fear of change, of losing control and stability behind their actions?

And, there can be no arguing about this – the woman was caught in the act of adultery, and that is wrong. We may not agree with the punishment of stoning, or even exposing her so publically, but what is wrong is wrong. Unless we name what is wrong and punish those who commit crimes, how can we function as a society?

The men, who bring the woman caught in the very act of committing adultery before Jesus, say to him '..the law of Moses commanded us to stone such

women. What do you say? And Jesus bends down, writes on the ground and says nothing. The group of Pharisees and scribes demand a reply 'What do you say?'

Jesus: 'let anyone who is without sin throw the first stone.' And then he bends down again.

And finally, perhaps, we identify with Jesus?

What was he thinking? What was he doing? Did bending down and writing on the ground give him time to think? Perhaps bending meant one man less standing threateningly in front of the woman .

And Jesus, in contrast to everyone else there, saw her as a child of God, created and loved by God, (...by him as the Word as we heard a couple of Sundays ago), and here he is, the Word made flesh, reaching out to this woman in her terrible state.

The Pharisees and Scribes want Jesus to judge her.

Jesus doesn't. He knows that when we judge someone, we are the 'good one', and the other is the 'bad one'; we are superior, the other is inferior, we know better than they. –In judging another we are building a barrier, separating us from them. Of course, we all judge others - perhaps too frequently, often seeing the negative in them instead of the positive.¹

Jesus sees the woman as a child of God, beloved by God, ...John tells us elsewhere in his gospel that 'Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. And salvation means – knowing our need for God and accepting God's love, which means healing and fullness of life.

Jesus is seeing the woman as well as her accusers with compassion and love and is acting in love. Jesus does not want this woman to grovel in guilt, but to

know that she has done something wrong, to discover that she is forgiven and that she can be free of guilt and also of fear. She can walk away knowing that she has dignity, that Jesus loves her.

A definition of 'sin', **Bede Griffiths**

'Sin is a failure of love, a failure to respond to the movement of grace which is ever drawing us out of ourselves into the divine light.'

In Lent especially, we are invited to grow in understanding of our failure to love, of all that separates us from God and neighbour.

In a short while, we will be invited to receive the cross of ash on our forehead with the words –'remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return' – words that remind us of our mortality – and that we are nothing without God. We have our life and being because of God and in God.

The Taize community suggests Lent is a time of retreat before the Easter celebrations, the festival of our liberation. In communion with Christ in the desert, each Christian we are invited during these forty days to a to turn our entire being towards God.

We do so with the help of God's grace , God's forgiveness sustains us on this journey. Amen.

¹¹¹ For this I am indebted to Jean Vanier' Drawn into the mystery of Jesus through the gospel of John,' DLT 2004, pp.141ff.