

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Ash Wednesday (Isaiah 58.1–12; John 8.1–11)

Wednesday 22 February 2023

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Sermon by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Jesus says to the woman, “Go your way and do not sin again.”

This is Ash Wednesday, when we come to God with a more than usual alertness to our mortality, to our frailty, to our shortcomings, to our sin, and we hear these words directed to us too, as Jesus says to us, “Go your way and do not sin again.”

And we say, well, we'll try but don't hold your breath, Lord.

Given that we know how persistent our sinfulness is, what does he mean speaking these words to the woman in the story? And what does he mean, speaking them to us?

Go your way and do not sin again.

The story of the woman caught in adultery is complicated, first because it does not seem to have been in the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel, and the exact same story is also found in some manuscripts of Luke's Gospel. A tricky story, and the early church wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Perhaps because Jesus is seen as being incredibly kind at a time when the early Church was becoming very strict about sexual sin. But it does seem to be ancient, and the church has said, it does have a ring of authenticity to it. We can imagine Jesus doing this.

When we look at it in John's or Luke's Gospels context, it is a story first of all about the scribes and the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus, by giving him a dilemma in which he either agrees to the woman being stoned, or agrees to disobeying the law of Moses.

It is more than likely that the woman herself had been entrapped – we might even imagine that her husband was involved in getting her caught – and this entrapment provided an opportunity to entrap Jesus. We might also wonder why no one seems to have trapped the man involved.

And then Jesus just slows the whole drama down, in the face of the self-righteous indignation and baying of the religious leaders.

He writes something on the ground – we have no idea what. The accusers persist. And his response is to remind them all that everyone sins, so start by looking at yourself.

And of course, if we hear Jesus' words to the woman as words to us, while we may not be adulterers, although we do remember that Jesus had something to say about adultery in the heart, we can find enough about ourselves to in some way be in the place of the accused.

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But then we might hear his words, “let the one without sin cast the first stone” and then we see ourselves in the place of the scribes and Pharisees, given our ability just once in a while to fiercely accusing or blaming others.

One way or another, we are all in the same boat. None of us is without sin.

And still Jesus says, “go your way and do not sin again.”

This is the condition he calls us into, and it is impossible, except it becomes more possible with him.

First, he is the one, we hear earlier in John’s Gospel, at his baptism, John the Baptist declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

And he has done that supremely on the cross, the moment of culmination, of glory for the author of John’s Gospel. And that the ultimate power of sin is broken, the power to keep us permanently estranged from God.

But sin still has a hold over us, and we, as St Paul says, do those things that we would not, and don’t do the things we would.

So how do we tackle those parts of ourselves that think or act in ways that we know in our hearts are wrong, harming us and harming others. Those secret corners of ourselves that we try to behave as if they didn’t exist; or those more obvious parts of ourselves, obvious parts that people see and we just wish they didn’t. Something within us that we keep to ourselves, or something we direct towards others – both of which we wish were not true.

To answer that, to give the answer that I believe is there for us to receive, I need to tweak Jesus’ words slightly. “Go your way, and do not sin again, and if you invite me, I will come with you”.

It is my own experience in prayer, that we – I – can bring myself, and those parts of myself of which I am ashamed or which I wish were different – and ask Jesus to help me. This is not a quick request, but times of pausing, reflecting, and above all attending to Jesus. I place myself, as it were, in this story, in the place of the woman caught, and say, Lord, here I am, please help me. And I know myself enough to know that I have to do this over and over again.

And what happens of course is two-fold. As it must have been for the woman caught. First, some clarifying process takes place, enabling me to see what I am bringing in a wider context. Our state of sin may have a private expression, but it has a social context, as it did for the woman caught.

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Jesus knew that she had been caught in something that was deeply wrong, but this was in a context of marriage of her day being seen, and we know this is not just an idea in the past, seen as a property transaction – the husband would have been angry in part at least because another man had stolen his property. And in each of our own situations, there is always a larger picture and placing this in front of Jesus first of all allows us to see that larger picture.

Secondly, being in prayer, seeing ourselves in the presence of Jesus brings us into the heart of love and forgiveness, into the presence of utter goodness, and so to knowing the relief of forgiveness, as the woman knew.

We can barely imagine the relief of this woman who thinking she was going to be stoned to death is now walking free – Jesus has given her her life back. She will not want to be in that situation ever again.

We too, experience that forgiveness and love and goodness when we place ourselves in his presence and ask him to help us, and we long to stay there, leading us to letting go, the inner change that in response to the goodness, love and forgiveness that we know we have received.

After all, the journey we are all on is to become like Christ, and this is that journey.

So let me now bring in our first reading, because the danger is that we end up with a rather narrow view of sin, narrowed down to sex, which of course is the church's besetting sin, or sex and anger.

Sin, in the passage from Isaiah, and reflected throughout the prophets, is about the exploitation and oppression of others. "Is this not the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked cover them...and satisfy the needs of the afflicted."

And we can hear the resonance with Jesus' declaration of his own mission in Luke's Gospel, "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." Jesus is quoting from other passages in Isaiah.

Our sin, the sin in which we all participate and which Jesus calls us out of, is social as much as it is personal. And at its heart it is how we regard and treat our fellow human beings. The moment we demean, or think ill of, or objectify,

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or take advantage of, we are not being Christlike. And being Christlike is to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, over and over again.

When I think about those sins that I take into my prayer, the hardest to face are those that have to do with how I regard another person, someone who I really can't stand, or has done something to harm others, or is threatening – and yet it is only when I take these reactions into prayer that I begin to experience the healing, forgiving love and goodness of Christ that profoundly shifts the perspective.

We come before our Lord this evening and ashes are placed on our forehead to remind us what we already know, that we are frail, mortal, sinners. But we know too that he calls us into life, and while that journey is long and can be very challenging and costly, that is the journey we want to be on. And so, a few moments later, we come into his presence, as ash-faced mortals, and he places himself into our hands and gives us all the love, forgiveness and goodness we will ever need for the journey.

Go your way and do not sin again. Yes Lord, with you being my helper.