

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone...’
(John 8.7)

Tonight we begin our Lenten journey towards Holy Week, the cross and beyond. On this solemn and sacred day we come face to face with our own mortality remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The sad milestone of 100,000 deaths from coronavirus is a stark reminder of the fragility of human life. By his actions in our gospel reading, Jesus rescues a woman but, in so doing, puts himself in danger. In this chapter of John’s gospel we start to see a pattern which will continue through to Jesus’ death.

Sitting outside the temple, Jesus is confronted by an angry crowd led by the scribes and Pharisees who bring before him a woman caught in the very act of committing adultery. It’s a nasty situation. Throughout this encounter there is no mention of the man involved. The scribes and Pharisees come with no thought for the woman who is merely a pawn in their game – both legal and political – to confront Jesus with what they think is an impossible question. What sentence should be passed? Should she be stoned to death? If Jesus says no, he is defying the Mosaic Law, if he says yes, not only will that mean condemning the woman, but it will also be breaking Roman law. It is a deeply unpleasant and highly charged state of affairs.

Jesus refuses to enter into the accusers’ game. He turns away from them, bends down and writes in the dust with his finger. In this simple action, Jesus takes all the attention away from the woman. He creates a fracture, a moment, a hesitation in the chaos and noise and heat for people to look at *themselves*.

By his answer, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone...’, Jesus both defuses and transforms the situation. This is no longer the story of the woman caught in adultery, but more the men caught in...hypocrisy. Jesus remains on the ground as one by one, beginning with the elders, the woman’s accusers realise that they themselves have been exposed and leave. The frenzied urgency is no more as the crowd disperses until just Jesus and the woman remain.

Only then does Jesus stand up and engage with the woman – alone in the temple. She is invited to enter into a new life free of condemnation, dignity restored – a fresh start.

And we too are invited to enter into this space to look at ourselves as we join *now* in this act of repentance. Repentance is a vital part of our faith. The word repentance simply means to turn around, to do differently. And tonight we are invited to examine our own souls and consciences, taking with us what is good and leaving what is disruptive or destructive behind. We do so *together* in the presence of Jesus, whose desire is not to condemn us, but to invite us to enter into a new life.

Holy God,
our lives are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son
bring us healing and make us whole
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**