

5th Sunday of Lent (C)

6th April 2025

'I do not condemn you — sin no more'

Is 43: *No need to recall the past* Ps 125: *Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage*

Phil 3: *if only I can have Christ and have a place in Him*

Jn 8: 1–11: *Neither do I condemn you ... sin no more*

I remember that it was this Sunday's readings that Pope Francis had before him on his first Sunday as Pope, back in 2013. In his homily that day, in the little church of Sant'Anna in the Vatican City, he said this:

“Jesus has this message for us: *mercy*. I think — and I say it with humility — that this is the Lord's most powerful message: *mercy*. ... The Lord never tires of forgiving, never! It is we who tire of asking His forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking for forgiveness, because He never tires of forgiving.” (17th March 2013)

From that moment onwards — right up to his decreeing the ‘Holy Year of Mercy’ in 2016, and this very Jubilee Year 2025 — Pope Francis has made ‘mercy’ the ongoing theme of his pontificate. This famous and moving Gospel passage from John ch. 8, today, regarding Jesus's treatment of ‘the woman taken in adultery,’ manifests very clearly His heart of mercy. It leaves us in no doubt that the Lord welcomes sinners, and *wants us to approach Him* in a

spirit of contrition, and is ready to forgive us.

The immediate setting for this scene, as the Gospel says, was for the Jerusalem authorities “to test Him.” Those who brought the adulterous woman to Jesus — and, by the way, where was the companion *adulterous man*, I've always wondered? ... there's a lot of inbuilt hypocrisy in this event! — reasoned that they'd successfully catch Him out, whatever He said: if He condemned the woman to the stoning laid down in the Law, then He'd lose His radical reputation for clemency and mercy; but if He said that the stoning must not go ahead, they'd have something direct to use against Him for His contradicting the Law of Moses. As we know, the Lord does not fall for their trick, and instead focusses on the spiritual need of the woman who has been brought into His sacred presence.

What can this poor woman have thought in that moment of forgiveness? What waves of blessed relief must have swept over her as she realised that this rabbi they'd dragged her before wasn't going to condemn her like the others, but was going to have compassion. She'd

been staring death in the face, a brutal execution by being pelted horribly with heavy stones. But here was Jesus saying, “No, I don’t condemn you — go on your way *but sin no more.*” Probably she hardly believed her ears — this holy man had found a way of confounding her accusers. She knew she was guilty, but here was someone unlike anyone else, giving her another chance, showing her love, inviting her love. Jesus in His wisdom knows that love requires forgiveness. As He says to another woman in another place in the Gospels (Lk 7), “*someone forgiven much, loves much.*”

On the other hand, the ones who go home bitter, *with their sins unforgiven*, are the scribes and the Pharisees. They each walk away when Jesus says that the one without sin can cast the first stone, beginning with the older ones: they each know in their hearts that they also have sinned. But they don’t stay to hear Jesus’s words of forgiveness — they just walk away, ashamed to have been caught out in their trick to trap Jesus into speaking against the Law.

Whom are we more like? *The woman*, who knows

her guilt but wouldn’t have brought it to Jesus voluntarily; or *the Pharisees* who were keener to condemn another person and only grudgingly admit they have sins of their own? Or instead have we actually heard God’s word and let it change our lives, so that we seek regular forgiveness from the Lord? What is that loving word? ... *I do not condemn you, go and sin no more.*

In Lent we ought to be addressing that urgent question, ‘Do I seek the Lord’s forgiveness? Have I been to confession recently enough? Am I as a bare minimum at least getting to confession *once a year* as the Church expects?’ Our preparation for Easter is necessarily tied up with repentance for sins, our trying harder to be close to Christ, our generosity to others. And the most healing part of that can come by being forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We want to welcome the risen Christ at Easter with pure hearts — and we simply can’t do that without this Sacrament of forgiveness which the same Christ offers us as a gift of love, the fruit of His Passion.

We need have no more fear of this Sacrament than

this woman need have feared that Jesus would condemn her. For it is the *forgiving Jesus* whom we encounter in the Confessional; the priest is but His minister, a channel of communication. Don't expect human condemnation — expect divine forgiveness! There will always be a degree of challenge in approaching the Sacrament; of course, that's only human: it's always humbling to have to bring one's faults out into the open ... but it's also very good for us; and the relief of having God put our sins away, forgotten, into the past, is tangible.

The other challenge is to *change*: to make every effort not to allow those same sins to be an ongoing part of our future. Jesus does not say to the woman, '*Neither do I condemn you, go and do what you please*' — that wouldn't have been forgiveness, but a total lack of interest. Instead, He's absolutely interested in us — His love strongly desires that we make the effort to change, to find ways of avoiding those habitual sins. Do we find we often bring the same sins to confession? Well, perhaps it is worth making it our practice to look that bit deeper — not just to

answer the question, '*What* have I done wrong?' but to answer the question, '*Why* am I doing these wrong things?' By reflecting more deeply at the reasons for our sins, rather than just superficially the mistakes themselves, we'll be better able to let God's grace work to improve us. Because we'll be conscious of what helps and what makes things worse — who, or what situations, most likely leads me to sin — and then we have a better chance of letting God's Holy Spirit in to act there, deflecting the temptations, strengthening us in times of weakness.

Do take one of the opportunities in these last two weeks of Lent to seek to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation if you've not already done so this Lent. I'll be hearing Confessions after this Mass (after coffee, c. 12 noon) and on Palm Sunday too, and this Friday after Stations of the Cross (c. 6.40pm). So, please, pray about this: pray for the strength to go to Confession, be reconciled to God in the Sacrament, for this is what He truly calls us to in Lent. God's forgiveness and mercy are boundless, but how can He forgive us if we don't bring

ourselves humbly to kneel before Him and ask for it? Let's promise the Lord the heartfelt keeping of what remains this Lent, including an honest opening-up to Him of our need for forgiveness. Every one of us needs to hear those words that save us and give us the hope of heaven: "*Your sins are forgiven ... Go in peace and sin no more.*"