

Fifth Sunday of Lent C/2022

The readings of this fifth Sunday of Lent talk about God's mercy and forgiveness. They show us that God is full of compassion toward sinners. They invite us to take advantage of the compassion of God and repent of our sins.

The first reading describes the mercy of God toward Israel and his deep desire to create anew the conditions of life for his people. It shows also that, just as God has accomplished great deeds for Israel in the past, he will do it again now for the good of his people. Finally, the text shows that God will bring a complete transformation of the life of his people, both in the land and in nature.

What is behind this text is the idea that with God a new future is always possible. There is also the idea that it is not good to live in the past, but rather to turn toward the future and to hope for the best. The last idea is the truth that God can transform everything, even that which is dead, by giving it vitality and a new life.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel as Jesus saves the adulterous woman from the hands of those who wanted to stone her. First of all, the Gospel says that, as Jesus was in the temple area and people started coming to him, he sat down and taught them.

After that, the Gospel says that the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery and asked him what he thought about it. The Gospel gives also the argument for which her accusers wanted to stone her by referring to the Law of Moses.

Then, the Gospel gives the reaction of Jesus who challenged the accusers by referring to their own faults to the point that they all went away. In the end, the Gospel says that the woman was left alone with Jesus who did not condemn her, but rather invited her to sin no more.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the triumph of mercy and forgiveness over self-righteousness. What do I mean by that? Let me start with some clarification. What is self-righteousness? Self-righteousness is a psychologic attitude or a behavior of displaying moral superiority over others. Self-righteous individuals are often intolerant of the opinions and behaviors of others.

Self-righteousness is very close to self-justification. Self-righteous people often feel they have a "leg up" on others, and their focal point is to make others around them feel inferior. They always have to feel that they know what is best. Self-righteous people are quick to blame and condemn. They are habitually critical of others and judge them severely. Unlike self-righteousness, mercy, on the contrary, is compassion and forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

These two attitudes are present in today's Gospel: the first in the attitude of the Scribes and the Pharisees and the second in the attitude of Jesus. While for the Pharisees and Scribes the adulterous woman deserves to die, for Jesus there is a possibility of redemption for her. What is required is for her to break with her past, to put it behind her, and to believe in the possibility of the future where the sin does not have impact on her anymore.

As a matter of fact, adultery was considered in Jewish society as a grave sin and punishable by death. From the legal point of view, the Scribes and the Pharisees were correct to recommend the death of this woman.

However, by bringing this woman to Jesus, their intention was to set a dilemma before him. If Jesus agreed to stone the adulteress, they would accuse him of lack of compassion and love, which was the basis of his teaching. If he ordered the adulteress to be pardoned, they would accuse him of failing to respect the Law of Moses. The only way to get out of that trap was to bring these people to face the reality of their own sinful life and to ponder.

It is clear that Scribes and Pharisees who brought this woman to Jesus were not honest. How easy it is to judge others and their misconduct by forgetting our own faults! By acting the way he did with the Pharisees, Jesus warns us and tells us that whoever passes easy judgment forgets that human fragility is common to anyone. It is hypocritical and dishonest to look only at the sins of others. If there is something we have to do is to start cleaning up our own house before that of the neighbor. This is why he says, "Let the one who among you is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her".

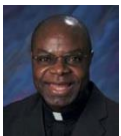
One of the mistakes many of us do is to impose on others a high standard of life we never even try to meet ourselves. Many of us condemn faults in others which are obvious in our own lives.

As psychologists have pointed out, easy judgment and pleasure in spreading scandals are only a way of hiding our own faults. By not condemning the accused woman, Jesus is not legitimizing adultery or justifying sin? Sin is always what it is and should be condemned. However, Jesus does not lock the woman in her sinful situation. He offers her the opportunity to repent. Jesus believes that each person has a past, but also a future. A past, as bad as it might be, can always be changed by God's mercy. What God wants is not the death of a sinner, but his repentance and conversion.

In that sense, forgiveness triumphs over self-righteousness and sin: "Go, and from now on do not sin any more". Anytime we are forgiven, we are presented with the challenge of becoming better persons. When we are forgiven, we are challenged to repent and make amends for our sins. Remember always that a saint has a past, but a sinner has a future.

Moreover, there is always a gap between justice based on law and justice based on love. Justice based on law is that of Scribes and Pharisees. It exists in order to judge, to condemn and to punish. The justice of Jesus is based on love. It exists in order to forgive and to save. The justice of law aims at condemning; the justice of love aims at curing the wrongdoer. For that reason, those who are in a position of judge or of authority must be like a physician whose deep desire is to heal and not to prolong the disease. That is what Jesus tries to do when he forgives us. Let us then take advantage of Lent and change our lives. Let us ask Jesus for the courage to renounce sins, repent and receive his forgiveness through the sacrament of confession. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 43: 16-21; Philippians 3: 8-14; John 8: 1-11



Homily Date: April 03, 2022
© 2022 – Fr Felicien I. Mbala, PhD, STD
Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20220403homily