

**Reflection on the gospel for today 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020 - John 8.1-11**

Of all the stories in the gospels without a satisfactory ending, this one, the one about the woman caught in adultery, is the one that frustrates and annoys me the most! If you do not know the story well, please look it up to refresh your memory. After all her accusers skulk away, having been forced by Jesus to examine their own consciences, he says to the woman, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.' That is the end of the story, according to the storyteller, St John.

Most of us assume that this is a happy ending. The woman is saved from death by stoning and returns to her normal life, forgiven and loved. All she has to do is to not sin again ..... easy ..... everything is lovely!

Well ..... no ..... think about it. She has been dragged through the busy streets by an arrogant, self-righteous mob of religious fanatics. She has been at the centre of a dramatic stand-off between those baying for her execution and Jesus. Eventually those wanting her dead walk away and then, after Jesus speaks with her, she too walks away. As far as we know, Jesus didn't broadcast what he said to her to all those watching, he spoke to her personally and maybe only his disciples heard what he said as well (which is the only explanation for this story being recorded in the gospel at all).

So that is the scenario; from most people's point of view, the woman who was guilty of adultery, gets away with it by some fluke or technicality, and walks free. Imagine the looks she must have received as she walked through the crowd. And then, where did she go? If she went home her husband would be there, unaware of any of what had happened. If she went to the home of close family or friends, they too may not know what had happened. But lots of people did know what had happened. The kind of people who stand and gawp when there is an accident, or someone is being humiliated ..... the news, the gossip, the theories about how she got away with it, would spread around the community like wild fire. Wherever she went, whoever she went to, she would have to tell the story, she would have to confess, and then she would have to live with the consequences, and John, frustratingly and annoyingly, does not tell us what those consequences were.

What we know, is that Jesus opened the door to new life for this woman. We know that she takes the first step through that door as she walks away. We can assume, because of her encounter with Jesus, the love, mercy and compassion she had received from him, that she wants to take hold of the new life he offers ..... BUT ..... did those closest to her see things the same way? Did her husband forgive her? Did her marriage survive? Did her family and friends forgive her and welcome her with open arms? In short, a happy ending

for this story depends on whether her husband, her family and her friends, after hearing her confession, were also able to say, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

This story is about a transforming encounter with Jesus. The woman in the story is saved, forgiven and offered new life. But, a proper happy ending depends on the generosity, grace and compassion of those closest to her. Did her husband, her family and her friends enable her to seize the offer of new life? So this story not only celebrates the mercy, grace and love at the heart of Jesus, it also challenges us to examine our hearts, to see how much mercy, grace and love we can find there when people we love let us down, make mistakes or maybe, sometimes, just sin.

A very challenging story in these days when so many are always looking for someone to stone - to blame and condemn, when things go wrong.



**Postscript** – There will be a story about this woman here on Good Friday. Imagine that she saw the lovely man, who had saved her life and forgiven her, being led through the city streets to be crucified ..... how do you think she would feel? Make sure you listen on Good Friday to hear one possible fictional account .....