

## Sermon Ash Wednesday 6 March 2019

### Isaiah 58:1-12 and John 8:1-11

On Monday I forgot a pass that I needed to wear that would give me both authority and access in the place I was going. So, I had to retrace my steps and go home to get it. As I was walking back, I came across a sight that at first made me quite envious and then made me laugh. At the top of Kendon Drive there are some waist high bollards to stop the traffic. A well-dressed woman was showing her flexibility and balance by raising one leg up and over the top of each bollard. That made me envious. What made me laugh was the fact that she was doing it with a lit cigarette in her fingers. And I wondered if both of us were showing signs of wanting to do something, but also in some way holding ourselves back: me, by forgetting something and having to return and repeat my walk; the lady by doing something to keep herself fit whilst also doing something that would harm her. Is that a bit like our Christian walk through life? And if so, how much does it matter?

George Herbert's poem 'Love' begins

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin

Even while the collect today bemoans our sins and our wretchedness, it starts with words that acknowledge that God hates nothing that He has made.

And so, why do we shy away from the love that makes us welcome. Why do we walk in ways that means we have to repeat things or do things that simultaneously build us up and knock us down?

Why don't we live up to the voice that says you are loved and wanted and will be for all time? Why do we listen instead to a voice that says we are small, fat, ugly, stupid, poor or whatever voice speaks to us or the one that tells us we need to analyse, fret over and understand every experience, hope and fear, rather than simply experience life?

Because there is only really one voice that matters, the voice of love, the voice of Jesus who forgives and commissions, Jesus who empathises with our shame, but does not participate in shaming us.

Jesus forgave and commissioned the woman in the gospel reading. Jesus, who did not look directly at her until all those who had accused her had left. He did not collude with the shaming of her, yet he made sure she knew that her sin did matter, even though God is choosing to set it aside.

Jesus did not directly accuse her accusers. Yes, he broke down the group mentality into individual mind sets but he didn't say to them, you are no better than she is. Instead he is more oblique, he invites them to look at themselves and to invite them to conclude that they have sinned by using God's law to make themselves out to be righteous, rather than letting it shine a light into their own hearts showing them that they need to change their ways.

Jesus saves a woman from a potential death sentence and he offers the whole community the means of salvation.

I could talk to you about how the law of Moses operated, just what an interesting legal bind the accusers have put Jesus into and the depth of his dilemma, for it includes the way Joseph, his earthly father, protected Mary, his mother, from similar accusations. We might well explore some of that in the Inspired to Follow course, which will include a painting of this gospel passage.

To acknowledge sin is a sign of integrity, it is an admission of faith that we need help if we are to be sustained and healed. And as a community too, as with the accusers, turning and turning again and again is needed.

So what is the result of acknowledging sin and accepting God's forgiveness?

The passage from Isaiah shouts at us to act responsibly and fairly. To stop gossiping about other people's sins. Can you hear the echo about being the first to cast a stone? Don't bicker and fight. Don't appear to be holy when we are not. Instead, let us be available to each other and do what we can to help the homeless and the hungry. And the result? Our lives will be like well-watered gardens. (Isaiah was speaking to those who lived in a land of drought, where well-watered gardens were cool places of peace, of refreshment – not the soggy waterlogged patch outside my backdoor) So think of our lives being places of renewal, may be with leafy glades and beautiful sunlit flowers.

Psalm 51 which is set for today is a Psalm of David written after he had been confronted by Nathan about his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. David asks that God will create in him a new heart and will put a right spirit within him and not cast him away. He asks that his public shame will lead others to God.

The disciplines we are invited to take up in Lent are not to make us worthy of salvation but to make us more receptive to the light and life of God.

And through them to hear his language of love. Not to hear a language of fear, or dare I say it, guilt. Not to hear, I worry that I'm not good enough. But to listen for, to look for his love and to be God's love to others (which I think is what Isaiah is asking of us). George Herbert's poem starts by pushing love away, because of fears that he is unworthy. It ends, having acknowledged that love made him, and accepting the invitation to sit down and eat love's meal of love.

To those who accuse themselves, God will bring mercy and grace. May we be receptive to the light and life of God this Lent, even if we do have to go back to pick things up.

Amen

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