

**Fifth Sunday of Lent: March 24<sup>th</sup> 2010.**  
**Isaiah 43:16-21; John 8:1-11**

**Notes: Isaiah 43:16-21**

- The exile is still a reality, though the deliverance from Babylon is anticipated. In verse 14 we see the writer speaking as though it was already a reality.
- The restoration of Israel is spoken of in terms it being a New Exodus and all of the wonders of that first Exodus will be repeated.
- Israel, in its new Exodus is not to forget all of the saving deeds that God had performed for them in the past: These have just been spelled out in chapters 42-43 and what happened in the past will now unfold into the future.
- The path through the wilderness is presented in terms of the path through the Sea of Reeds when the people escaped from Egypt.

Today's reading brings our attention to the spiritual state of the people and how their spiritual state flows over in the realities of the world around them. He begins by telling them not to look back to the past and to the bad things that have happened to them. They are a part of their history. They happened because they forgot the place God should have in their lives. They preferred the ways of the world around them to the ways of the Covenant and the more they moved God to the edges of their lives, the more they took over the direction they took. That sin – and it is the sin of Adam – is the sin of “playing God” and it is a path to destruction. The writer says that fact should be abundantly clear to them as they are still prisoners in Babylon! Sin brings its own reward!!

But they are urged to forger the judgment that they have brought upon themselves and to look back into the past to remember what kind of God their God truly is. Their past is filled with examples of the goodness of God, the mercy of God, the power of God and the plans God has for the whole of creation. In other words he is urging them to turn their eyes to God. To trust him and to let go of the controls they seem to continue to wish to have over what happens to them. Either they trust God to be God or they seek to control things themselves. If they choose the latter they will remain in Babylon as prisoners. It is a prison of their own making and it is sentence they have earned.

So what is God offering? This is where the author uses the past to offer hope and the promise of new life. He urges them to keep their eyes firmly fixed on God. If they follow God, if they are prepared to place themselves into his hands, then he will lead them to freedom. There is a desert between them, a vast wilderness that would be impossible to cross. It is a place of wild animals, of nomadic tribes that would destroy them and of trackless wastes where water and food are not to be found. As Isaiah paints it, the wilderness will be a place of death and destruction or a place of life. The choice is theirs. They can look to freedom through their own efforts or they can allow God to lead them to freedom.

As God says – and this is now directed to us today – *See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you see it? Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness paths in the wilds.* That is what God is offering us – a new deed. And that new deed is the sending of his only Son who lived and died and rose again. That is the new deed and it is Jesus who is offered to us as the *road in the wilderness*. That makes his question very challenging: *Can you see it?* Can we see Jesus at work in the midst of all of the various “wildernesses” through which we might find ourselves travelling? Where is our Lord at work?

That can be a real challenge when we look around at our Church and see the problems and difficulties we face. All too often we can see what Isaiah describes as *wild beasts* both inside the Church and in the wider world all too eager to pounce and tear us apart. They have their

focus on one thing and one thing alone, death and destruction. We can also look around us and see an ageing Church, a shrinking Church a Church that is becoming more and more irrelevant in the eyes of the very world we have been sent to serve as yeast, as salt and as light. Where do we go? What do we do? How do we not just survive but grow?

Well, Isaiah offers us the clear and only biblical way forward: We must be God focussed. We have to renew our faith and our hope in God, find where he is speaking to us and follow him into a new life. There is only a single path through whatever the wilderness might be and that is the path lit up for us by God. That path is Jesus. He is the *way, the truth and the life*, but to find that path we have ourselves to be Christ-like. The more we model what we do, what we think and what we say on him, the more confident we can be that we are following him. When we retreat back into human ways, to ways that simply imitate the ways of the world around us, we will flounder and the wilderness will remain our home.

We are fast running out of the season of Lent and so the pressure is upon us. Have we changed in any way? Have we spent time in prayer, in searching the scriptures, in seeking to change our lives so that we move a little closer to God? That is the only way to renew the Church and to rejoice in the milk and honey that is on offer from him. Repent.

### Notes: John 8:1-11

- Scholars today point to excellent textual reasons to show that this story, of the woman caught in the act of adultery was not originally a part of the Gospel of John though it is clearly a story that was going around the faith communities going back to an encounter between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees.
- The setting is the Temple and a large crowd had gathered to observe what is about to happen, which is very Lucan construct.
- This woman has been *caught committing adultery*. This is a very dramatic image with the language giving the impression of her being seized and dragged away after being caught in a sexual act with someone other than her husband.
- It is a scene dripping with embarrassment, with pain and with all kinds of emotions.
- This woman, probably only partially clad, hiding her head in shame, stands before Jesus knowing that if the Pharisees have their way she is about to be stoned to death.
- These men think they know what Moses would do in such a situation. They challenge Jesus to see if he will be as faithful. They ask in a way that leaves no doubt as to their motives: *What do you say about her (8:5)?*
- The judgment of Jesus is being pitted against the judgment of Moses.
- Note: they are no longer interested in the woman, or in her husband and certainly not in the partner of this woman. Their consuming hatred is directed towards Jesus.
- The woman becomes a convenient prop on which they can hang their debate, she has been turned into an object, a case study, an example *that they might bring charges against him*.
- It is not possible to work out what Jesus wrote in the dust. It is probably best to see it as an action that shows his disappointment, his indifference and his growing frustration at the tactics of the Pharisees and Scribes.
- After this dramatic pause in his exchange, he comes back into the debate and challenges these religious leaders: *if there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone*. This sin he is talking about is presumably a sexual sin.
- After these leaders shrink away Jesus is left with the woman and Jesus addresses her as a human being calling her “woman” and “you”. She reverences his by referring to him as “Lord”. On the basis of this relationship he commands her to *sin no more*.

Today’s Gospel story takes us to a very living Jesus and reassures us of the reception that we will receive when we come before him with our sins exposed. It is a great story as it presents us with a sin for which the punishment was death. There can be no doubt about her guilt as

she was caught in the “very act of committing adultery”. She is a sinner and at the mercy of the world around her. She is shamed, embarrassed, vulnerable, exposed and more than likely subject to the mocking and merciless crowd. Imagine what it must have been like. Caught in the act of having sex with a man who was not her husband and immediately dragged before Jesus in the Temple. Half naked, embarrassed, humiliated and scared to death she was made to stand there, exposed for what she was: a shameless sinner.

What we have are two different reactions to this. The first is that of the Pharisees and the Scribes, those men who were supposed to be the defenders of the Law, the men responsible for leading God’s people into covenant faithfulness. They seem to be rejoicing in her sin. She had disappeared from their radars as a human being, let alone a fellow child of God. They had their sights set on something else – bringing Jesus down and this destructive passion, this obsession blinded them to everything else. They turned the woman into a convenient tool with which to inch Jesus a little closer to their courts.

We are given this reading on this fifth Sunday of Lent to force us to examine our lives and our motives and to see if we are guilty of similar sins. It is not the adultery that needs to be our focus but the way we treat others. The sin of the Pharisees was that they turned the woman into a non-human. They did not see a woman before them just something they could use to bash Jesus over the head. Their lust for revenge, for evening the score against their foe consumed them to the point that they were no longer concerned about who might be suffering as a result of their own sinful blindness.

I heard a saying recently that helps us to understand what is going on here: *hatred is a poison that someone takes hoping that it will hurt someone else*. What we see in John’s Gospel is what we saw hinted at by Isaiah. Sin becomes a self consuming way of thinking and acting. The more we throw ourselves into godless ways the more we end up harming ourselves. For the Hebrews it meant exile in Babylon, for the Pharisees here it meant one more humiliating defeat at the hands of the man they hated and as well, a public acknowledgement that they too were guilty of their own secret sins.

The other person to watch here is Jesus. There is no way he is willing to tell the woman that it is alright for her to break the law of Moses, that she can commit adultery and God will not worry about it. He upholds the Law but he sees the sinner and it is to the sinner he reaches out in mercy. Yes, she is guilty. Yes, she has done wrong. Yes, she does deserve to die by the terrible death of stoning – but the loving mercy of God transcends all of that.

He calls her woman and in so doing shows us how we are to act towards others. He looks beyond the sin, through the sin to the daughter of God who has fallen by the wayside. He makes no judgment and I can visualize Jesus coming up to her, picking up her robes and covering her nakedness, removing her shame and embarrassment and giving her a chance to begin again. That is the model we are given and it is a tough one. It is much easier to follow the path of the Pharisees and demonise the sinner, judge those we feel have wronged us or who live lives that do not live up to our expectations. But as disciples we are called to model our lives on the life of Jesus and to fail to forgive, to fail to reach out in loving mercy would be to sin, to chose the way of the Pharisees instead of the way of the Lord.

## **Conclusion:**

As ever, these are both uplifting and challenging readings. We are offered a way out of whatever wilderness we might think we are travelling through, either as a Church or as individuals. We are told that there will always be jackals snapping at our heels, always a desert through which we need to travel and always a Babylon from which we will need to be set free. And so we are told that we need God. Without God we are left to feed ourselves, to

defend ourselves and to find our own way through trackless wastes and history is full of examples of how this kind of self leading ends up in sorrow, pain and even death.

God want to be our light and as he says through the prophet Isaiah *See, I am doing a new deed!* Can we see that new deed? Can we see the path that God has marked out for us? It is there, and in the Gospel of John we are given a bit of a hint as to where we might care to look to find that road.

We will only find that new deed if we become Christ like. If we can look at others through the eyes of Jesus then we will see the path forward. If we can examine the world, examine the deeds of others, examine our own motives, examine our own deeds in the light of *what would Jesus see* and *what would Jesus do* and *how would Jesus act* then we might just be able to see where it is God is leading us.

At the background of today's theme is the reality of Babylon. Babylon is a place we create for ourselves, a prison of our own making. We condemn ourselves to such a place and our faith communities to such a fate as soon as we ignore the invitation of the Gospel to repent, to take up our vocations and to follow Jesus. If our worlds are worlds without God, or world where God is at the margins then we are doomed to our little Babylons where the only way out is God. That is what Lent is all about. It is an invitation to walk together along a new road in the wilderness, where the wild animals honour us and the dry river beds flow with cold, refreshing water. It is all up to our willingness to allow God to lead us.