

5th Sunday of Lent (C)
(Isaiah 43:16-21 / John 8:1-11)
03.04.2022
Sin & Hope

Both Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees agree on the fact that the woman standing in their midst has committed a sin. And yet the end of the episode reveals that there is something unresolved between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees, so it is quite normal to ask ourselves: where is the problem?

The problem lies not in the reality of sin but how to deal with a concrete sinful situation.

For the scribes and Pharisees, the best way to get rid of a sin is to remove, reject or kill the sinner; for his part, Jesus believes that, because behind every sin there is wound, the best way to deal with sin is to heal the person. Ultimately Jesus knows that the only powerful remedy able to heal a wounded person is love. Instead of removing the sinner, Jesus opts to embrace him or her in love. Again allow me to repeat it: love is the only power for change in our lives, only love begets new life. In so doing, Jesus is utterly faithful to his mission: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (Jn 10:10)

In the context of our Gospel reading, we see that love is not first about emotions and feelings. Jesus is not particularly warm or affectionate with the woman. For Jesus, and in our story, love is about pointing the sinner in a new direction, indicating to her a way out of her sin. What matters for Jesus is to help sinners, it is to help you and me, to realise that it is not because we have failed and fallen that our lives have reached a dead end. He wants us to understand that we cannot be defined only by what we have done. There is always a way forward for us.

In our story, Jesus highlights something else which is important to grasp: he can deal with the situation in a more authentic way than the scribes and Pharisees because he is without sin.

He is in the light – in fact he is the light (cf. Jn 8:12) – and so he is able to see sin for what it is in truth. He is also able to see the roots and the impact of sin in our lives. On the contrary, the scribes and Pharisees are sinners, and so their vision is blurred and limited. Whether they want it or not, consciously or unconsciously, the scribes and Pharisees, and all of us for that matter, approach every human situation with personal, religious, societal lenses which are not completely focused and clear. And so we are prevented to see sin in truth, ours and that of others. This is what the Lord means when he said to Samuel: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1Sam 16:7) In short our problem is that, as Jesus said to the Pharisees, we “judge by human standards.” (Jn 8:15)

I do not know whether or not you noticed it but, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is non-stop up and down: the story begins with him being seated, then he bends down, he stands up, he bends down again and finally he stands up again.

The times when Jesus stands up coincide with the times when he speaks first to the scribes and Pharisees and then to the woman. Jesus stands up because he is able, and in fact he alone is able, to look straight in the eye what is sinful in us, he alone can face sin for what it is. He knows what is in the hard-heartedness and legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, he

knows that the woman has been caught in a behaviour which is considered as a sin. Yet there is a deeper truth, Jesus can look at the scribes, the Pharisees and the woman and see, beyond their sins, that they are still the beloved children of his Father, they are his sister and brothers.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, when Jesus meets the rich young man, we are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him (cf. Mk 10:21). Jesus does not look at the scribes, the Pharisees and the woman in a condescending, patronising or judgemental way, he does not kill them with his gaze, rather he invites them to delve deeper into who they are and how they should relate to each other.

On one hand, he asks the scribes and Pharisees to reflect on their own sinfulness and how it should inform their evaluation of the behaviour of the woman; on the other hand, he opens a door to the woman and place before her the great challenge of faith which is to live in right relationship with God, with others and with herself.

Jesus is the one before whom we can all dare to be vulnerable, wounded, open about our weaknesses and sins, feeling humiliated and not despair. Jesus knows our misery and our pain and he loves us. We have to remember that when our own hearts condemn us, and when others condemn us, God's love revealed in Jesus Christ is greater than our hearts, and greater than what others may think of us, because he knows everything (cf. 1Jn 3:20).

The double challenge for all of us is first to allow Christ to look at us in truth, to reveal our sins to us and at the same time our deepest identity as sons and daughters of God. Secondly, we are called to look at others with the same gaze with which Jesus looks at us. The radical difference between Jesus and us, and the great mistake of the scribes and Pharisees, is that we cannot take a high moral ground because we do not look at others from a place of sinlessness. If we do not want to become like the scribes and Pharisees, the only way is for us to choose to become like Christ, to allow him to grow within us, so that we may relate to others in their poverty, vulnerability and sinfulness in a more life-giving way.

In our families and communities, we have to pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened with the light of Christ so that we may know what is the hope to which he has called us all (cf. Eph 1:18). Because, and that is the deepest truth of the story we heard today in our Gospel reading, God never gives up on us, God hopes against all hope. (cf. Rm 4:8)

In the same way, let us be full of hope in our own regard and in regard to others.