

5th Sunday of Lent (C)  
(Isaiah 43:16-21 / John 8:1-11)  
13.03.2016  
The Adulterous Woman

Dear brothers and sisters,

In today's gospel passage, we have heard that the scribes and the Pharisees want Jesus to judge and condemn to death a woman caught in the very act of committing adultery.

Let us be clear: these scribes and Pharisees – these spokesmen for the official Jewish religion of the time – are not concerned at all by the Law of Moses and the woman's disobedience to that Law. Proof is that, in that gospel passage, there is not a word about the man, even though the Law said quite explicitly that in that situation both man and woman should suffer the death penalty. (Lev 20:10 and Dt 22:22)

These scribes and Pharisees just want to set a trap for Jesus. They want to have him contradict himself so that they may use that contradiction against Him.

It is written in the Law of Moses that women like this must be condemned to death by stoning. If Jesus, who is very well known for welcoming sinners and outcasts, calls for mercy, he is setting himself up against the Law of Moses.

But if Jesus condemns this woman, he is unfaithful to his mission. Jesus was sent into the world by his Father not to judge the world, but to reveal the Father's love to all human beings without exception. Jesus' mission is to love people, all people; it is to be close to people, and to reveal to them their value and beauty, their grandeur. Jesus came into the world not to condemn people but to save them; his mission is to liberate them and lead them to love. So, Jesus cannot judge and condemn this woman, because this is not his mission.

We are the disciples of Jesus and the disciple is not greater than his master. So we too should be careful not to judge. But we have to confess that we have a natural tendency to judge others. We do so very quickly and very easily.

Brothers and sisters, who are we to judge? We know how it is easier to see the speck in the eye of our neighbour than the beam in our own eye. How can we point our finger towards the sins of our brothers and sisters, when we are sinners ourselves, and often even greater sinners than those we denounce? If we don't commit the same sins as those we condemn, we commit others. One thing is sure: we are all sinners, all of us, without exception. Only Jesus is without sin. We all need the forgiveness of the Lord, we all need his mercy.

When we judge our neighbour, we take the place of God; we act as if we were God. We become slaves of the petty god we are, that is to say slaves of our false self, our super-ego, our perfectionism, slaves of our own limitations. We become the reference for everything. Very quickly we become angry, proud, intolerant, violent, disdainful, because things are not going our way. At the end, we are very far from the holiness and the perfection of our God which is mercy and compassion.

Better than to judge others would be to confess our sins and recognize our need for mercy. We all need to experience God's mercy and compassion in order to be merciful and compassionate in our dealings with others. "Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven". (Luke 6,36-37).

Previously we have said that Jesus cannot judge nor condemn this woman, because this is not his mission. Nevertheless Jesus does not say that adultery is right. He tries to find a way to liberate both the woman brought before Him and the men who brought her without filling them with guilt and shame.

Spontaneously, we think that we cannot forgive someone before he repents. He must first repent so that we may forgive him.

It is interesting to notice that Jesus' perspective is different. Jesus does not say: 'Change and I will love you'. Jesus loves us and then we change in order to respond to the Lord's love for us.

In today's gospel, Jesus does not ask the scribes and the Pharisees to change before speaking to them. Jesus loves them and finds a way to help them to reflect upon their attitude. He tells them: "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her"... And what happened? "They went away one by one". They were probably led to realize in themselves: This woman is a sinner, but we too are sinners. So we cannot judge and condemn her. The loving and not condemnatory attitude of Jesus must have led the scribes and the Pharisees to feel themselves to be respected and loved by Jesus also. Those scribes and Pharisees who were filled with fear by the newness and freedom brought by Jesus are liberated from their fear and aggressive behaviour... Becoming aware that they are loved and respected, they cannot but respect the woman.

Jesus does not condemn the woman either, but he talks to her, looks at her and respects her. She is set free by Jesus' behaviour towards her. She discovers that, in Jesus' eyes, she has great value, just as each human being has. Thanks to Jesus' behaviour towards her, the woman is on the way to being reconciled with herself. She discovers that a true relationship with others, who don't look at her with disdain, as a vile object of pleasure, is possible. She discovers the healing power of love.

Jesus' attitude of mercy is not an easy way, because he adds: "Don't sin any more". If we are sinners, and I hope that we all are convinced that we are sinners, we know that it is not easy not to sin any more. How easily we fall and fall again and often into the same old traps! Yes God's mercy is exacting. But with God's grace, everything is possible; it is possible to be set free from those sins we may have thought we could never throw off.

Let us welcome the Lord's regard of mercy upon each one of us. He does not love our sins, but he loves each one of us. The Lord waits for us with his arms wide open. His love for us invites us to come back to Him and change our lives. His desire is to set us free from sin, to deepen our communion with Him and to establish us in communion with one another. Let us welcome the Lord's love. Let us allow the Lord's love to heal and renew us.

Amen.