

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)  
(Isaiah 43:16-21 / John 8:1-11)  
06.04.2025  
*Encounters*

Some 60 years ago, the great German theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote: “We can only remain human; indeed, we only come to ourselves in ‘encounter.’ Truth only appears (...) when we come face to face with another person.” (*Love...*, p. 37-38)

This morning, in our Gospel reading, we are given to witness three life-changing and truth-revealing encounters.

The first one was not life-giving. It took place when the scribes and the Pharisees met the woman taken in adultery. The encounter was clearly marked by pride and was gender biased. In a case of adultery, there are two persons who are guilty, yet it is only the woman who was condemned by men. Their judgement was in conformity with the Law, but Jesus was in no doubt that it was motivated by self-righteousness and hardness of heart.

The second meeting was prompted by the desire of the scribes and Pharisees to test Jesus, literally “to tempt” him. Their endeavour failed not because Jesus rejected the Law but because he remained faithful to his mission: “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.” (Jn 12:47) Here we must acknowledge the miraculous change of heart realised by Jesus’ challenge to the scribes and Pharisees. Hard and self-righteous as they may have been, they suddenly showed honesty, they left the woman alone, without stoning her.

The third encounter, which concludes the story, took place between Jesus and the woman. There is something particularly striking in this meeting: Jesus neither judged nor condemned her. He only invited her “not to sin again.” Jesus displayed a great deal of respect for a woman who was publicly humiliated. Moreover, implicitly, he reminded the scribes and the Pharisees of God’s words in the book of Ezekiel: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the sinner, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?” (18:23)

Here Christ tells us that the inviolability of life does not depend on whether or not the person is guilty in the eyes of human justice. Unlike a political leader, whom I will not name, who claims to be against abortion and yet, as soon as he was installed, restored federal capital punishment in his country, Jesus Christ is really pro-life.

The three encounters that we have noted in today’s Gospel reading really are crucial in that they challenge us in many ways.

When our brothers or sisters in humanity fall or make a mistake, do we stand like the scribes and Pharisees as merciless judges? Do we claim the moral high ground for ourselves and humiliate them? Or do we, like Jesus, show compassion and understanding, patience and hope?

We have also to ask ourselves if we can stand exposed, naked, in front of God. The woman had no choice, but we have. Do we honestly come into the Lord’s presence as trustful children, confident in his generous and unconditional love for us? Or are we so proud and self-reliant, so overwhelmed by shame and guilt that, like Adam and Eve, we prefer to hide?

One last point. Like the scribes and the Pharisees, are we humble enough to acknowledge that sometimes we may be in the wrong, even when the law and traditions are on our side? Do we not sometimes forget that, as Romano Guardini reminds us, “there is something higher than justice, the bountiful widening of the heart to mercy.” (*The Lord*, p. 259)

Von Balthasar was clearly right: we become truly human through encounters and truth reveals itself through dialogue and meetings. This explains why, as Pope Francis reminds us, in the life of the Church, “primacy is given to relationship, to the encounter with the sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family” (*FT* n. 277). It is important to acknowledge that, while the internet is undoubtedly a valuable tool, the meetings we have discussed this morning as essential to our humanity are not virtual ones. We need real meetings.

When St Paul wrote: “We longed with great eagerness to see you face to face” (1 Th 2:17) he expressed a deep desire of all human hearts which is to meet with others in the flesh and in truth.

In the Bible, at the heart of both Testaments, we find God’s desire to meet us and to journey with us. Moreover we find our own longing for God and for being in relationship with those around us. God’s desire and our longing for him came together in the person of Jesus, in God who took on our flesh and became one of us.

The culture of encounter promoted by Pope Francis is a reminder that we cannot meet God without meeting one another. None of us can be saved on his or her own. Pope Francis wrote: “Withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter.” (*FT* n. 30)

In our daily lives, we meet a lot of people, some with whom we spend time and some whom we simply ignore or actively reject. It does not matter whether we like them or not, the challenge for all of us is to create a culture of respect for every man and woman. Respect here is the key word because, as Pope Francis stated, the culture of encounter “requires of us to place at the centre of all political, social and economic activity the human person, who enjoys the highest dignity.” (*FT* n. 232)

The scribes and the Pharisees were unable – or did not want – to respect the dignity of the adulterous woman. In these last weeks of Lent, it is not too late for us to check whether or not we respect everyone as we should, whether or not we are faithful to our mission to be guardians of one another. St John Chrysostom commenting on Cain’s answer to God: “Am I my brother’s guardian?” (Gn 4:9), declared: “Cain despised his brother, and so he despised God (...). Let us not despise one another, lest we learn also to despise God. Let us honour one another, that we may learn also to honour God.” (*Hom. 7 on 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy*)