



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

As part of the [BBC Radio 4 Extra Daily Service](#) for Ash Wednesday, Archbishop Stephen offered a short homily. This follows in full...

Clarity isn't always everything it's cracked up to be.

Several things in this story are crystal clear.

First of all, the woman at the centre of the story has indeed been caught in the very act of adultery. She is not denying it. She is, as they say, bang to rights. Though the whereabouts of the man who must also have been part of this congress is never clarified. Funny that.

The law, however, is also clear. She must be stoned to death and this is what the righteous men who have caught her intend to do, and they come to Jesus, who now has something of a reputation for being a bit soft on matters like this, to ask him whether he supports their action.

Jesus plays for time.

Well, you would, wouldn't you? In such a situation?

He bends down and writes with his finger in the sand.

Interestingly – and incidentally – this is the only time in the gospels that Jesus is ever recorded as writing anything.

We obviously don't know what it was. Perhaps a doodle, like we might scribble in a margin as we puzzle something out.

Perhaps a few words, writing to himself for reassurance, because, I guess, the one thing that was clear to him in this moment was that, yes, there is the demands of the law and the demand of justice - someone has plainly done something wrong - but there is also the demands of mercy, because while this woman has been caught in adultery, what of all the other sins, the hidden wrongs, the unseen failings to anyone but yourself and God, that each person jabbing their fingers in accusation knows they have committed too?

Perhaps he's writing words from Psalm 85, whose central theme is God's righteousness; that only God can be merciful and just. In God 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other' (Psalm 85. 10), but in us, flawed human beings that we are, each one a sinner in need of grace, there is only compromise and what we choose to do with it. Either arrogant condemnation of others, quick to throw stones and claim the high ground, or sober humility knowing that we must be merciful to others because we are in such need of mercy ourselves.

And this Jesus, writing in the sand, surrounded by the righteous indignation of the confident and confronted by this frightened woman is God; God among us. God among us. God with us. This Jesus, tempted as we are and yet without sin, is the one in whom mercy and justice embrace.

'Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone,' he says, and bends down to write again. Perhaps these words: 'Mercy and peace are met together.' (Psalm 85. 10)

The crowds when they hear this, go away.

'Where are they?' he says to the woman, 'Has no one condemned you?'

'No one,' she says.

'Well neither do I,' says Jesus, 'Go on your way, and do not sin again.'

So perhaps there is clarity after all, but not necessarily the clarity we are after, because it means that if there is any high moral ground to stand upon, either as individuals or institutions, be it the Church of England, the Government or the BBC, it will soon crumble away.

The clarity is this. Jesus clearly and kindly instructs the woman to sin no more. He does not condone her behaviour. But he does not condemn her either. She is given a chance to start again, to make amends.

Can we?

Can our exercise of justice be tempered by mercy? Can we be clear about what is wrong, but just as clear about how we will put it right, each recognising our own need for penitence, sorrow, mercy, and amendment of life.

Well, this is what Lent is about. It is an opportunity to reflect upon our own need of God, to confess our sins and failings, to be honest about ourselves, but to let that honesty overflow to others so that we can build communities - and a society - where there is proper accountability for those who have done wrong and proper opportunity to make amends?

Today in church services up and down the country and around the world as Christian people receive a sign of the cross on their foreheads made from ash, the priest will say these words; 'Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.'

Which is another way of saying, do not sin again, and do not throw stones at others who sin like you.

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