

Homily – April 6th, 2025 – 5th Sunday of Lent



There is a drive in all three readings to leave the past in the past and to forge a new future. The reason this drive is in the readings is because it's the fundamental drive in God, and since Jesus

came to do God's will, it's the fundamental drive in Jesus as well—to make all things new. We cannot make all things new without God nor without letting go of the past. Holding onto past sins or living in a Church of nostalgia (longing for the “good old days”) will not help us bear fruit now. It won't help us build the Kingdom of God here and now.

600 years before the birth of Jesus, our Jewish ancestors in faith found themselves languishing in exile, prisoners you might say, in Babylon. They had been there 50 years but something was about to give. Isaiah speaks God's words of hope to these people by saying, ***“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I'm about to do a new thing.”*** Their liberation was at hand. 700 years prior to that, God did a new and powerful thing in liberating their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. It was about to happen again.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians says something similar when he said in our second reading, ***“I regard everything as loss.*** Everything I thought was so important when I was young, every cause I was willing to die for, I now consider rubbish (garbage). I no longer want a faith that comes from the law, a faith based on keeping rules—that’s garbage. I want, instead, a faith that comes through Christ, a faith based not on rules but on trusting in God. I’ve found that faith and now realize the self-righteousness of my past was like death. Following Jesus is like life, and so I strain forward for a future of hope that lies ahead.” It’s like Paul is asking the questions that all adults eventually ask: Is there not more to life than this? Isaiah and Paul would answer with an unequivocal, “YES, there is!”

Then we get to that familiar gospel story of Jesus liberating a woman into a future full of hope. It’s the last story added to the Bible. In fact, some people didn’t want it to be in the Bible (the canon) because they felt Jesus was going too “soft” on sin. It’s a symbolic story and is really misnamed if we call it the “story of the woman caught in adultery.” If it was a realistic story, instead of a symbolic story, we would have to ask, “What about her accomplice? Why isn’t he humiliated like her?” Being a symbolic story, as we go through it, we realize it’s not about sexual sin at all. It’s about how we attach ourselves to false gods.

It starts off by telling us that Jesus went down from the Mount of Olives to the Temple. All the people came to him. Obviously, all the people can’t fit into the Temple, so symbolically this means his teaching is for all the people, everyone, including us. Now the only other time the Mount of Olives and the Temple are mentioned together in the Bible is in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. And things

went this way. As the people allowed all kinds of injustices, as they disregarded the covenant they had with God, God grew angry with the people. And as they became more addicted to false gods, God became more uneasy living with such people and finally decided to move out. But God's glory didn't leave in a one fell swoop; it left in stages. God's glory resided in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. As the sins increased, God's glory left the Temple and leapt up to the Mount of Olives. As the people's sins got worse and worse, it leapt from the Mount of Olives back into the sky, into heaven. The people were spirit quenched. God had left the land. People were left to their own devices. The covenant was harmed badly.

Notice what's happening in today's gospel story. The glory of God is returning the way it left. Who is Jesus in John's Gospel? The one who comes from heaven, the one born from above. This is the story of the return of the glory of God. Jesus leaves the heavens, comes down to the Mount of Olives and back into the Temple.

Some self-righteous scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery and made her stand before the people. When Jesus rises from the dead, he appears to the Apostles and says, ***"Peace be with you. Whose sins you hold, they are held. Whose sins you release, they are released."*** This is not sacramental reconciliation. This is the power every one of us has to hold people to their sins or to forgive them and set them free. It's a choice. The Pharisees choose to hold the woman to her sin. They're very good at it; they do it for a living.

Beyond humiliating this woman, I think they are really going after the big fish in this story—Jesus. ***"Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing***

adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test Jesus so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

They are holding this woman in her sin, but they do not have a sin that they can hold Jesus in. So they have to get him to sin, to fall into a trap, in order to have something they can hold him in. They have a vested interest in sin. If Jesus forgives her sin, they will accuse him of blasphemy as only God can forgive sin. If he condemns this woman, he will be in favor of capital punishment and thus more aligned with the Romans than with God.

Jesus doesn't take the bait but bends down and writes with his finger on the ground. Some people have suggested that he is writing the sins of the Pharisees. I not so sure. I don't think Jesus is into humiliating them even though they are humiliating this woman. It tells us that Jesus wrote twice on the ground. The only other person, in the entire Bible, who writes twice is God. And there's only one thing God writes with—his finger. With the finger of God, God writes the Ten Commandments. Moses takes the Ten Commandments, comes down off Mount Sinai, walks down the mountain and catches the people what? In the very act of adultery. That's why she is caught in the very act of committing adultery. What does Moses do? He smashed the Commandments. And Moses picks up the broken pieces and proceed to stone the offenders with the Commandments. And that's what the Pharisees want to do to this woman. They want to use the tablets of God's Law as stones to stone her to death.

What is adultery? Using something for a purpose it was never meant to be used for. These Pharisees are committing adultery but using God's life-giving Commandments, not to give life but for another purpose—to kill this woman.

Getting back to Moses. After he breaks the Commandments over people's heads, he goes back up Mount Sinai, to which God said, "Smooth move, Moses!" At one point Moses says to God, "Show me your glory." God said, "You can't handle it, but I'll let you see my backside. I want you to go over and hide yourself in the cleft of the rock. I'll pass by, put my hand over your eyes, then remove my hand and you'll see my backside. Oh, by the way, cut me two more tablets, since you—not me—broke the first two." Moses cuts two more tablets, and with the finger of God, God writes the Commandments a second time. Moses overhears God say, "The Lord, the Lord, mighty in mercy from generation to generation, forgiving iniquity upon iniquity."

Now we know why Jesus writes twice. Because God writes twice. The glory of God is that God writes twice. In between the first and second writing is the deepest truth. We are all in solidarity in the world of mistakes. We cling to our failures and we hold others to theirs. God holds none of us to our sins, but writes a new covenant in our hearts a second time, a third time, a fourth time, etc. The only one who writes once, who never gives a second chance, is Pontius Pilate. "What I have written, I have written."

The glory of God has returned to us here. It has no intention of leaping back to heaven, nor of holding us to our sins.

“Do not remember former things, like your sins, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

~Fr. Phil