

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12

John 8:1-11

As we have mentioned already, It has been suggested that we set today Ash Wednesday aside as a day of prayer and fasting for Ukraine.

I preached this sermon (or at least part of it) at our Ash Wednesday service two years ago – but it seems particularly apt for today so I am daring to preach it again.

*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*

The words of Jesus to those people who were accusing the woman of adultery. Words spoken to respectable people, teachers, lawyers, religious leaders. Those whom society looked up to.

Recall what had happened. They had brought to Jesus a woman caught in the very act of adultery. (no mention of what had happened to the offending man – but that's another issue). They said to Jesus that the law of Moses says that such a woman should be stoned to death. What do you say?

Would he forgive her and thus render the whole of Moses law redundant? Would he condemn her and be seen to be siding with them? Here they were, basking in their own moral superiority; revelling in the fact they had trapped him with their question.

But what did he do. He bent down and wrote on the ground. Making them stand and wait. And then he stood up.

*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*

And he bent down and started writing on the ground again. We can imagine them looking at him; at the woman; and then at each other. Considering what he had said. Thinking about their own lives. And we read:

*And when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders.*

We might wonder what Jesus was writing on the ground in the dust, we might speculate on what he would have done if the scribes and Pharisees had brazened it out and remained. But here he teaches us a great lesson worth pondering on at the beginning of Lent.

*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*

Its all too easy to be an accuser. To see ourselves as better than others. To be willing and keen to blame someone else when things go wrong.

We can see this all around us. The blame culture. The scapegoat. Reflected in the way that, for example, immigrants or refugees or those different from us are all too easily blamed when things go bad. When admitting we are wrong is seen as a weakness, whereas in fact it's a strength.

How much more would I admire a politician, for example, who stood up and bravely said "I got it wrong. I made a mistake" rather than those who squirm to try to justify themselves and pass the blame onto others.

Remember another saying of Jesus.

*Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's<sup>[a]</sup> eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your neighbour,<sup>[b]</sup> "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's<sup>[c]</sup> eye.*

We heard in the introductory words at the beginning of the service that Lent is a time of self-examination and repentance of sin. But before we can do that we need be sure that we understand what sin is. What we are examining ourselves for and what we are aiming to repent of. This is where the Scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman to Jesus failed. They could see one sin, one failure that the woman had committed but were blind to their own shortcomings and to their negligences.

And the danger is that we might well be the same.

A contemporary Christian writer, Francis Spufford in his book *Unapologetic* describes sin as "*the human propensity to mess things up*". Actually he uses a much fruitier word than mess, but the meaning is much the same.

Now I think that tends to throw a slightly different light on things.

Sin isn't simply breaking rules or hurting people or falling short of some ideals we might have. Sin is all around us, all the time, in everything we try to do or think or say. Whenever things go wrong (as the confession we sometimes use puts it) *in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.*

Sin permeates the whole of humanity. Everyone. Everywhere. Regardless of background, status, age or whatever. Which is why in the end those scribes and Pharisees in the gospel reading went away one by one. Eventually they recognised they too were part of the problem. And its interesting to note that the older ones realised this first.

So where does this leave us, and what can we do? We can never, surely, be free from this sin. We will always get things wrongs and mess things up. We lived in a messed up world. So how can we – as Jesus says to the woman – *go on our way and sin no more?*

And that's where this time of self examination through Lent might help.

In the OT reading from Isaiah we read of God's anger at those people who on the outside were obeying the law; who were worshipping and praying and fasting, who were being much like those scribes and Pharisees. Those who concentrated on their own piety rather than the well being of the world around them.

God says – the kind of fasting, the kind of religion I am looking for in you is the kind that puts love and kindness and generosity into practice. Loosing the chains of injustice; undo the thongs of the yoke of oppression; to feed the hungry; to house the homeless.

But these kinds of things are not the result of individuals' sins. They are not the result of a woman committing adultery or a thief stealing some sheep. They are the sin of society; the sin that we may not be able to see our lives directly affect, but which is real and which hurt and cause suffering. It is society as a whole – through accident or design; through policy decision or indecision, through deliberate action or unseen side effect – that has messed things up to make these things happen.

But its important to see our part in that. We are part of society, part of a world that allows inequality and injustice and abuse, part of a world that allows the planet to be defaced and destroyed; part of a world where there is violence and warfare. What God is asking through Isaiah is that his people recognise this and do all they can to change systems and structures.

So perhaps as we pray for peace and pray for Ukraine today and as long as we need to, we might too look at ourselves and ask if we can in some way be that peace – in our lives, in our communities, in our words and in our deeds.