

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent cycle C

Part of life is anticipation: the quiet times when we're left to our thoughts and can muse on some event that we're looking forward to. These days I'm really anticipating Easter, even though I know I should stay focused more on Lent still; I can't help but imagine how great it's going to be; I'll come over to the church around sunset and look around and think, eh, not quite dark enough yet for the Easter Vigil Service of Light; I pray for a while, wait for it to get truly dark, and then imagine this space aglow with all the individual candles. I look forward to the starkness of the church on Good Friday, the beauty of the Church in full splendor when we celebrate the resurrection; I start to look forward to the songs which we only get to sing during the Easter season. But if we anticipate the good in life, then we also must anticipate the bad in life; my worst anticipation had always been of the dentist. I remember as a child getting into the car to go to the dentist's office, and I had one of the best dentists in town; in fact, from the time I got up in the morning and probably even the day before my appointment I could think of only one thing: the shot of Novocain. That was the worst; oh, how I hated that. I didn't even realize it when I was little that I was getting a shot; I thought he was just slashing the inside of my mouth. No matter what other distractions the world provided me with, in the back of my mind, and in the front of my mind as I walked down that hallway to the dentist's chair, I thought about, obsessed about, continually imagined: the moment when he would inflict that pain.

The Gospel today relates the story of the woman caught in adultery; how her anticipation of things must have changed radically. One minute: carefree indulgence in sin, seeming as though she was getting away with it; then suddenly, busted: and she went from anticipating her illicit pleasure to anticipating the shame and the punishment of having been caught. One can only imagine what ran through her mind when they grabbed her and dragged her outside to where all those people were. We can only imagine her fear of the stoning, especially of that first stone: how badly would it hurt? Would it knock her out, would she stay awake for much of the bloody assault? The fear in her heart as the Pharisees announced that she had been caught, when they reminded Jesus and everybody else present about the Mosaic law, which called for her stoning; her fear, as she waited to hear what the Teacher, Jesus, had to say about this case. Her dread when he did not say "do not stone her" but rather said "let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Let him. Let the condemnation begin, if they dare; would they dare? They left, one by one. But as long as any were there, she had reason to fear. Finally, only Jesus was left, and he dismissed her by alleviating that final fear: none of the others can condemn you, for they too have sinned and they in their fear do not want to call judgment upon themselves. And Jesus, who

is without sin, does not condemn her; he only admonishes her to sin no more; to not put herself in the position ever again of having to face that first stone.

Much like the woman caught in adultery had to dread that first stone, so too has man always dreaded death; dreaded it instinctively. What's not to dread? Like the punishments of old, in which people knew that if they were caught that the first stone would fly through the air and hit them, death is inevitable. Inevitable, and yet an unknown quantity: man had no idea what it entailed, if it was peaceful, painful, if we found true freedom or if we just ceased to be. By becoming a man subject to death, as are we, Jesus changed our knowledge of death. We know now, for instance, that condemnation is not inevitable any more; God has given us the means to avoid condemnation, and given us the knowledge of what we must choose in order to know that we are choosing eternal life with him. We know that our souls live on even after death, that after death the things we do with our souls here, namely, know others and love others, will continue. We know that our bodies are to be resurrected one day, resurrected and glorified. But there are also some forks in the road to eternity, and we know of these forks but don't know with certainty which way we will choose to go, because we have *this lifetime* to make the choice. We may be with God in eternity, or we may choose to be separated from God for eternity. We may enjoy communion with the saints—company with them, and hopefully among them our loved ones—or we may instead have to endure the estrangement of Hell, where there is no love, only hatred and anger; anger, hatred, and blame. Obviously, one of the things God is continually trying to warn us about is that there is still much to fear, if we don't choose wisely which path we wish to go down in this life.

The people walked away from the stoning, but they didn't leave all at once. It wasn't as if, as soon as Jesus said "let he who is without sin cast the first stone," they all just collectively said "well, I guess none of us will qualify" and just took off. They went away one by one; they were challenged by the question, and they thought about the answer. Certainly among them had to be some holy and righteous men; yet even these understood that they were not perfect, that they were not without any sin whatsoever. Perhaps others, who didn't think that they were "perfect," quote, unquote, but weren't so bad, and didn't ever do anything really heinous, and who overall considered themselves to be in pretty good standing with God, gave it some thought and realized that their imperfections were freely chosen sins, and that offending God even in seemingly small ways is still offending him. In a way, all the people in that crowd walked away because as delectable as vengeance against the blatant sinner, such as the woman caught in adultery, sounded to them, *true justice*, condemnation for all sins against God, did not sound so good to them. In a sense, it was not mercy for the woman they wanted as much as mercy for themselves.

They hung around because they didn't immediately rule out the idea of casting that stone against her; they left, down to a man, because they feared the stone that might one day be destined to be cast towards them.

Saint Paul wrote to the Philippians "It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it"—here he is speaking of his faith, his life in Christ Jesus. Paul never took his faith, never took his salvation for granted; he knew that as long as he was running the race here on earth, he also had the wherewithal to abandon the race. Life during this time is about attainment and pursuit, and anything less risks taking our salvation for granted, and unexpectedly losing it in the end. We have begun taking hold of our ultimate good, but we do not yet possess it; this is why the Church is not where we declare our holiness, but rather where we seek our holiness. Just as Jesus told the woman in the Gospel to sin no more, so too does he tell us to leave our sins behind, to leave behind those things which invite that first stone of condemnation upon ourselves, and to find true peace and freedom instead. If to sin no more is not our expectation, it certainly must be our intent, and must be our hope. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "behold, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" What may seem like repetition to us is actually something new each time: with each Mass, graces which we did not have before, a communion with God deeper than when we were here last; with each confession of sins, a new outpouring of mercy and an additional dose of spiritual strength to resist sin; the stains of the past gone, and we walk through those doors to a future that we can anticipate with peace. The thing about dread is, that it's not exactly unrealistic. I can honestly say that for all the time and mental energy I put into dreading that moment at the dentist's office, I was right: man, did that smart, every bit as much as I thought it would, and every time. The woman caught in adultery had every reason to dread those stones flying at her: it was an awful, painful way to go. What she didn't know as they dragged her off to present her to Jesus was that in him she had not one anxious to condemn, but rather, a Savior. And he is our Savior as well, should we choose our salvation. Our lives here now are about anticipating our ultimate good, and pursuing that good over passing pleasures. Strain forward to what lies ahead: not the fear of the first stone which we invite upon ourselves with our sins, but the relief, and release, that will come when we set our wills on the attainment of union with Christ, who has every right to condemn, but whose desire is only to save.