

THE EMMAUS SERIES

5th Sunday of Lent, Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:8-14

John 8:1-11

Let the one who has not sinned be the first to stone her

Today's gospel reading, the story of how the enemies of Jesus – 'looking for something to use against him' – brought before him an unfortunate woman guilty of adultery, is one of the most memorable incidents recorded in the gospels – full of encouragement for us as we come towards the end of our Lenten journey. As we have recalled more than once, the four gospels of the New Testament bring together many small stories current in early Christian preaching. Today's gospel is a story that survived independently of the canonical gospels - to be incorporated in the text of John's gospel in about the third century. Scholars judge that it probably came originally from the pen of Luke. It is an appropriate choice for our Lenten liturgy. As we listen to the story, we are invited to join the crowd around Jesus witnessing the woman's humiliation. If we have been guilty of serious failures, we are invited to meet the merciful love of God – a realistic love that invites the woman to acknowledge her 'sin'; but at the same time sends her away with a new sense of her own worth: 'Neither do I condemn you, go away and don't sin any more'. As the amazing story of how Jesus challenged those who dragged the unfortunate woman before him unfolds, each of us is invited to identify with God's compassionate ways – perhaps, our complacency is making us blind to our hidden selfishness.

Today's first reading comes from the time of exile. In the midst of apparent failure, the prophet – in the name of God – has an astounding message of hope. A 'new' intervention of God, like a new Exodus, is promised. As a consequence, the people God has made his own will 'sing his praises'.

As is so often the case in the Church's liturgy, the reading from Paul is a celebration of fulfilment – what was promised and foreshadowed in the Old Testament reading has been realised! This reading brings together – simply but very effectively – some of the principal themes of Paul's teaching. It can give a focus to our reflections in the last stage of our journey towards the Easter celebration. Paul speaks of achieving 'perfection'. We will be misled by this term if we do not recognise that it belongs to the language of old Israel. Before his conversion, Paul sought to serve God by perfect observance of the prescriptions of the Law – 'the perfection that comes from the Law, by my own efforts'. His conversion has made him realise that true 'perfection' – the right relationship with God that he calls in other places 'justification' – is a gift of God, found 'through faith in Jesus Christ'. This powerful text helps us to appreciate all that this 'faith' implies for Paul. Far more than merely assenting to the right truths, it means 'knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' – a 'knowing' that is born of profound personal experience (as when someone says 'I have known success and failure'). 'Knowing' Christ, Paul says is sharing his very life, 'having a place in him'. Thus he 'shares Christ's sufferings' and 'the pattern of his death'. But through his faith in the Paschal Mystery, Paul 'knows' already 'the power of Christ's resurrection'; and his life is henceforth a 'straining ahead' to all that is promised to those who are faithful.

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