

5TH SUNDAY IN LENT Year C

The story is told of a young French soldier who deserted Napoleon's army but who, within a matter of hours, was caught by his own troops. To discourage soldiers from abandoning their posts the penalty for desertion was death. The young soldier's mother heard what had happened and went to plead with Napoleon to spare the life of her son. Napoleon heard her plea but pointed out that because of the serious nature of the crime her son had committed he clearly did not deserve mercy.

"I know he doesn't deserve mercy," the mother answered. "It wouldn't be mercy if he *deserved* it."

That is the point about mercy: nobody deserves it. Everyone deserves true justice. Mercy, on the other hand, is sheer gift. Mercy cancels out wrongs and transgressions – not because a sparkling defence has been found or excusing causes have been skillfully argued – but because that is the free response of the person who has been grieved. Mercy does not suggest that the guilty are not guilty; it recognizes the guilt but does not demand satisfaction of the wrong. In all this, mercy reflects the utter graciousness of the one who has been wronged.

In today's Gospel we have a magnificent story of the mercy of Jesus as he forgives the woman taken in adultery. It is interesting to note that the story is missing from the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. Some scholars argue that the delay in accepting the story as part of the Gospel reflects the difficulty many people had in the ease with which Jesus lets the woman off the hook, an easiness which was totally at odds with the strict penitential practices of the early Church. If this is true, it reflects an old problem many people had with Jesus and many people have with God: really believing in what Graham Greene has called "the awful strangeness of God's mercy." Does God forgive as easily as that?

In the Gospel story the woman is caught committing adultery. If it takes two to tango, it takes two to commit adultery, but the man concerned seems to have had ready access to an emergency exit, leaving the woman in the hands of the scribes and Pharisees. These men know the Law of Moses which stated: "If a man has intercourse with another's wife, both must die, adulterer and adulteress, and so Israel is rid of a plague." (Deut.22:22) The

scribes and Pharisees are zealous about the execution of the Law which means the execution of the woman. They are in the moral majority for they clearly have the Law on their side. Thus armed they come to tackle Jesus on the issue.

Jesus' reaction to all the fuss is to start writing on the ground. But his questioners persist and Jesus responds not by taking issue with the Law but by taking issue with the lawyers. When you remember the law but forget what the law is for, perhaps your memory is a little selective. Jesus does not say that the woman is innocent or argue that adultery should be taken off the books; but neither is he persuaded about the innocence of her accusers. He asks them to exercise their memories and check their **own** track record on sin. If any are innocent, they can throw stones. And while they're all having a good think, Jesus goes back to his writing.

At least the woman's accusers are honest people for they readily recognize that they are not innocent accusers. So the procession of unemployed executioners is led away by the eldest – who is no doubt giving the example of necessity! Of course Jesus doesn't want them to just walk away but he hopes they will go and exercise their forgiveness too. Jesus and the woman are left alone. As St. Augustine described it poetically, "*two are left: misery and mercy.*" And the woman hears good news from Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

When we see that Gospel scene we can all imagine ourselves in the place of the woman who was a less than perfect sinner, and we probably have no trouble filling in the faces of our accusers who are ready to heave a stone or two in our direction. But that scenario is too easy. The challenge of the Gospel is not whether we can see ourselves as the woman who is caught in adultery, but can we see ourselves in Jesus' place - as *the man who is caught up in forgiveness*. Can we forgive as readily as Jesus forgives? Or do we dote on people's wrongdoing, reminding them of past failures, and lighting vigil lamps to their mistakes? Can we forgive and leave it?

We spend time wondering whether God can really forgive without hoarding the hurt. Can God ***really love and forgive unconditionally***? Well, God's track-record on forgiveness is clear: God has had lots of practice and is good at it. How about ***our*** track-record?