

Justice Giving Way to Mercy

By: Fr. Munachi Ezeopu, CSSP

There is little known sidelight to the story of the woman taking in adultery. After the Pharisees brought her before Jesus for judgment and he said, **Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,** a stone was hurled from the crowds. Jesus looked up, frowned slightly, and said “Do you mind, mother? I am trying to make a point here.” In one this is a good joke because it shows the natural tendency of good people, like the Pharisees, to throw stones at those they consider sinners. In other ways it is a bad joke because it tries to paint Mary in the color of sinful humanity. The last person who would want to throw a stone at the sinful woman would be Mary, God’s most favored one. According to the joke, Jesus says he is trying to make a point here. What is the point that Jesus is trying to make? Why would the church give us this story for our spiritual nourishment on the last Sunday before Holy Week when we commemorate the suffering and death of Jesus on our behalf?

The story of the woman caught in adultery has a very curious history in the early church. Most ancient bibles do not have it, some have it as part of a different chapter in the Gospel of John, and still others have it as part of the Gospel of Luke. Some scholars think that, originally, this story could have been part of Luke’s Gospel. This is because it reflects themes that are dear to Luke, such as, concern for sinners, interest in women, and the compassion of Jesus. The fact that it is missing in some early bibles and found in different locations in others suggests that some early Christian communities had removed this story from their bible. When later Christians tried to put it back into the Bible, they were no longer sure of its original location.

Why would anyone want to remove this story from the Bible? There are people who cannot understand why Jesus would sympathize with a convicted adulterer. After all, it is decreed in the Bible that such offenders should be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). Does this not seem like an obstruction of justice? Remember the case of Karla Faye Tucker, the self-confessed, repentant murderer who was executed in Texas in February 1998. Many Christian organizations, including the Vatican, had pleaded for her pardon. Yet the execution was carried out. Supporters of the death penalty argued that no one should interfere with

the course of justice. Well, Jesus just did. There are people who think that compassion and leniency are a sign of weakness. These are probably the kind of Christians who tried to suppress the story by removing it from the church’s Bible.

How could Christians read these marvelous stories of Jesus’ compassion and still take a hard line stand with regard to the correctional services? The answer lies in how one reads. Some people identify themselves with the Pharisees when they read the story. Their interest is how to deal with *other people* when *they* deviate from the law. Their answer is usually that justice should be allowed to run its due course. Now you can begin to understand why the medieval church did not see anything wrong with burning “convicted” witches like Joan of Arc on the stake. Didn’t the Bible say that no one who practices sorcery should be allowed to live (Leviticus 20:27)? That is the law, that is justice. Their only duty is to implement it.

But when we read the story, identifying ourselves not with the Pharisees but with the woman herself, then we begin to see the story for the good news that it really is. Like the woman, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Like her we all deserve death, for the wages of sin is death. But when Jesus comes into the picture, he overturns our death sentence. He sets us free with his words of absolution: **“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again”** (John 8:11). The story shows how Jesus stands up for sinners before the law. In so doing he draws upon himself the hostility of the hardline officials who will eventually arrest him and give him a taste of their justice. The church, I believe, puts this story before us today so that we can see ourselves this sinner woman whom Jesus saves from sure death at the risk of attracting death to himself.

This story then becomes a fitting preparation for Holy Week when we see Jesus making the ultimate sacrifice to grant us clemency, we who are already sentenced to death by our sins. As we prepare for Holy Week, let us thank Jesus for his mercy and love. And let us promise him that we shall commit ourselves to doing exactly as he tells us: to go our way into freedom, and to sin no more.

READINGS OF THE WEEK

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:8-14

John 8:1-11

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慈 悲 的 師 傅

吳 智 勳 神 父

上星期我們聽到路加說有情的父親，今天，讓我們看看若望怎樣講慈悲的師傅。「師傅」兩字很重要，因為一班職業師傅挑戰另一位師傅，問一些只有師傅才知道的法律問題；而耶穌作為師傅，必須回答別人的提問。這是一個了不起的故事，非常戲劇化。喜歡看偵探小說的人，會發覺裡面有很多令人懷疑的地方，例如，既然這個婦人是犯姦淫時被捉，為甚麼只捉女的？梅瑟法律不是聲明男女犯姦淫都要死的嗎？此外，聖殿是神聖的地方，不會容許犯姦淫罪的人入內玷污的，經師和法利塞人那麼熟悉法律，帶犯姦淫的婦人入聖殿是不可思議的事。可能這些人有雙重標準，為了難到耶穌，不惜暫時不講法律；亦可能作者諷刺這些要求執法的師傅偏偏自己首先不守法。

他們用一個兩難的問題去試探耶穌，而這個問題似比問應否給凱撒納稅更難答。他們不是問耶穌那婦人是否有罪，也不是問應該處以甚麼刑罰，而是問是否執行梅瑟投石的法律。如果耶穌說不執行，不但輕視梅瑟，亦可能姑息罪人，鼓勵犯罪。如果耶穌贊同執行法律，又怎能與祂的教導調和？耶穌不是要人慈悲待人，要人寬恕罪人嗎？此外，這也是梅瑟法律和羅馬法律間的取捨問題，守梅瑟法律便破壞羅馬法律，自有羅馬人去對付耶穌；若守羅馬法律，耶穌便成為羅馬人的幫兇，喪失在猶太人心中的地位。

從耶穌處理這事的手法，我們可以得到很大的啟示。耶穌的身體語言帶出一些信息。祂坐下的時候是師傅教導，審判的姿態。當這些人質問耶穌時，祂彎身在地上寫字，不再坐下，明顯地不想做判官。祂彎身在地上寫字，可能是讓控訴的人有時間冷靜下來，意識到設圈套害人不對的，亦有可能耶穌心痛到不想看罪人的面，讓他們彼此看到對方醜惡的嘴面；有些教父認為耶穌把控訴者的罪寫在地上，因為耶納米亞先知曾說：「凡遠離天主的，必被記錄在地上」（耶十七 13），難怪他們看後一個一個的走了，文字的譴責遠比面斥容易為人接受，因為保存了人的尊嚴；也有認為天主在西乃山上用手指寫十誡，現在耶穌用手指寫天主的誡命，提醒人不要定人的罪，把判斷交給天主。耶穌跟著站起來，這是個控告的姿態。舊約要求證人要為犯人的死負責，耶穌本可用一句話，使他們知難而退：「讓控告人先向犯人投石」，保證沒有人敢動手，但這樣說僅具法律智慧而缺乏信仰幅度；因此耶穌說：「讓那些無罪的先向她投石」，既然他們動機不良，通通都是罪人，自然一個一個的走了。

這故事不在乎標榜耶穌的智慧，要消解這個兩難問題其實有其他辦法，例如說：「帶她離開，不要玷污聖殿！」「哪一個肯定她有罪的就自己下手」。耶穌答案的巧妙處，是從這個婦人的罪轉而到每一個人自己的罪，看到原來自己同樣是罪人，需要天主的寬恕。天主的慈悲不單是對這個罪婦，而是對所有人，包括經師和法利塞人在內，耶穌願意帶領所有聽眾回到天主那裡。故事裡最後的話是結論：「我也不定你的罪，去罷！從今以後不要再犯罪了！」故事是慈悲的勝利，氣氛雖然緊張，但沒有火併的衝突，因為慈悲不需要爭吵，更不需要喧嘩。

經師和法利塞人利用一個罪婦來為難耶穌，這婦人在故事裡完全沒有尊嚴可言，被人擺在中間作工具，她是生是死，會否悔改，這班人一點都不在乎；他們看法律，只在乎懲罰犯罪的人。耶穌亦講法律，但祂用法律去治療人，使人覺悟不會再犯。耶穌將這婦人看成一個人，讓她面對面的向著天主，恢復她的尊嚴。這個婦人回去後，相信一定不一樣。我們與他人交往時，有將別人看成工具，為達到某一個目的嗎？抑或像耶穌一樣把人看成是一個有尊嚴的人？

故事中，年老的先走，最後才是年輕的，是年老的犯罪多嗎？其實，作者大概是位老人家，願意幽年輕人一默。老人家經驗多，覺悟快，所以他們很快聽出耶穌弦外之音，認識到自己是罪人，不要「五十步笑百步」，所以很快退出去。只有年輕人以為世界只有自己才理直氣壯，充滿正義感，最後剩下他們時，環境迫使他们承認自己也是罪人。所以，這故事可能為年輕人有特別意思，不要只講正義，基督徒更要講慈悲。總之，從慈悲的師傅身上，我們感受到天主的慈悲。這個優美的故事，讓我們看到慈悲比懲罰更能使一個人悔改，更能重拾個人的尊嚴，更能以愛還愛。

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