

## THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 28th March 2004

John 8: 1-11.

What a stunning passage in today's gospel reading! It is far from new to us, and immediately several points are highlighted, without deep explanation, for they stand out clearly in the event:

- The woman – caught in the act of adultery
- The crowd – ready to condemn, without mercy
- Jesus – who responds in a variety of ways, including
  - Facing the woman's sin openly
  - Dealing with the woman in compassion
  - Facing the crowd's judgement openly and possibly angrily
  - Dealing profoundly with the crowd – “he who is without sin, cast the first...”
  - As a result, we see what Jesus is about; we see his characteristic way of handling people graciously
- Humanity, when ready to cast the first stone – we are reminded of what we can be all about too, when ungracious and condemnatory, when judgmental attitudes prevail!

An immediate question comes to mind:

- So where's the man? You don't have to be a feminist activist to ask that question!

(Reminded me of campaigns in some N. American cities to expose “Johns”; also of Vancouver experience where women prostitutes had been viciously attacked and one murdered, and some elderly church ladies started a campaign to protect them – taking down the John's car registration details for protection in case of assault or worse; for some prostitutes, that was the first point in finding a way out of prostitution, as they finally found someone truly interested in them as persons, and it led to numbers of them choosing to alter their lifestyles AND to commit themselves to following Christ...)

- ... Which points to a common tendency to blame one party in some situations, excluding others who are part of the situation, or without knowing the circumstances;

That is not just a prostitution / sexuality issue but applies in so much of life.

- Examples include issues around HIV/AIDS – stigma – people reluctant to acknowledge their HIV+ status because they have seen the judgement brought on others; people turned out of their families when they have bravely revealed their HIV+ status

- Judgement of people who have turned to prostitution – when that was their only means of survival; quick to judge the motives of people in such situations
- Why focus so much on prostitution?
- It IS the issue in THIS story but...
- ... Much deeper than that is Jesus' response in general to someone's sin ... and his response to the condemnatory crowd!

Someone wrote **a summary of that Gospel passage** in prose style:

When her accusers had left  
 Jesus turned to the woman and asked:  
 "Is it true what these men said?"  
 She nodded her head.  
 "That means you were in sin then."  
 Once again she nodded her head.  
 "To be in sin is to be in darkness.  
 And you were not made for darkness but for light."  
 He paused, and then added: "Has no one condemned you?"  
 No one, Sir" she replied.  
 "Well then, neither will I condemn you.  
 Go in peace, walk in the light,  
 And do not enslave yourself again."

A faint smile appeared on her tear-stained face  
 And she began to move away.  
 She went slowly at first,  
 As if fearing that at any second he might stop her in her tracks and recall her.  
 But then she picked up speed and bounded away  
 With all the enthusiasm of a reluctant school-goer  
 Who had just been given an unexpected free day.

She was dismissed with infinite gentleness  
 And the most delicate of reproofs.  
 How differently it might have ended  
 But for the grace and compassion of Jesus.

### **Grace - the last best word**

According to Christian journalist and writer, Philip Yancey, author of the book "What's so amazing about Grace?" - "grace" is the last best word. Many wonderful words have lost their meaning, or their sense has changed; yet the word "grace" has lost nothing over the years.

Let me read a short story from the introduction to Yancey's book, from a true event experienced by a friend of his working with the down-and-out in Chicago: (pp.11-12, edited)

"A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her 2-year old daughter. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story.

I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last, I asked her if she'd ever thought of going to the church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

"What struck (Yancey) about (his friend's) story is that women much like this prostitute were drawn towards Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently, the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers. What has happened?"

The more Yancey pondered this question, the more he felt drawn to grace as the key.

He writes: "Like a vast aquifer, the word underlies our proud civilisation, reminding us that good things come not from our own efforts, rather by the grace of God. Even now, despite our secular drift, taproots still stretch toward grace."

Listen to ways in which we use the word: Many people "say grace" before meals, acknowledging daily bread as a gift from God. We are grateful for someone's kindness, gratified by good news, congratulated when successful, gracious in hosting friends. When a service pleases us we leave a gratuity. ... A composer of music may add grace notes to the score (which though not essential - they are gratuitous) add a flourish, the presence of which would be missed.

We receive "grace issues" of a magazine subscription, (at no charge - gratis). Someone important "graces us" with their presence. We speak of a person's "fall from grace", and if a person is not welcome in a country, they are declared "persona non grata" - an official declaration that a person is legally without grace!

"Salvation is by grace alone", says the Christian statement of faith, based especially on the teachings of the apostle Paul, in turn based upon the teachings of Jesus Christ. This declaration emphasises that our salvation depends only on what God has done for us - which is grace. It is not ever (that is: never, ever) based upon what we may have done for ourselves or for God. If grace is so crucial to faith & salvation, it is appropriate to understand it well.

Grace is frequently used in the NT - often as the Greek word, "charis" (translated: "gift").

It is associated with rejoicing and happiness. St. Paul stated that the church was founded to proclaim the good news of God's grace.

Yet often the church is associated with other thoughts and experiences far from grace: People who are grace-less, unsmiling and lacking in joy, with holier-than-thou attitudes towards those considered unworthy of belonging to our church. The church is associated more with morality than grace, as if it is a place to go, only when you have cleaned up your act, neither before nor in order to find grace to do so! No

wonder the prostitute in that story is appalled at the idea of going to church for help - "they'd only make me feel worse", she says!

Hearing this, you may feel indignant - maybe you consider yourself a person who radiates grace, or perhaps you can think of countless examples of grace. Thank God for that - grace still abounds, in more ways than we can count. So let us continue counting, to make ourselves aware of it, for we live in a world desperately hungry for grace, and if the people of God can't experience it and point others towards it, we are to be pitied.

Christian writer Gordon MacDonald says, almost all of the things the church can do, can also be done by secular society. There is only one thing the world cannot do, he says: It cannot offer grace.

Many turn from God, or never turn towards God, because they have experienced only judgement and graceless-ness from his followers. Many arrive at church, seeking grace and compassion. They may not say so, they may not even understand what it is they are searching for; but offer them grace, and ultimately they respond to the Giver of grace - God - for then they know that that is what, and Whom, they were seeking!