



# Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at the Ash Wednesday Eucharist, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2014,  
By The Dean**

## **Ash Wednesday (John 8:1-11)**

Last night there was a news item about youth crime. I was reading while it was on and half listening to my son explaining something or other about the Europa League. I wasn't taking the news to heart. Then they did the *vox pop* thing, interviewing people on the streets where the crime was taking place and suddenly a mildly disturbing story turned chilling. There was a woman who was a bit impatient with youth crime, they needed teaching a lesson – in prison 'you do the crime, you do the time' she said. I wondered where she had learnt that phrase and I wondered how often she used it. Then there was a rather excitable man, one of those people who repeated the question 'What would I do with them? What would I do with them? ...I would hang them'.

It was perhaps people like that who dragged that adulterous woman before Jesus

*Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?*

This little story has at least three serious theological headaches in it. Books are written, conferences meet, and scholars in shapeless sweaters poke sticks at it. One of the problems is that there is no due process. This is not how justice is done. Scribes and Pharisees shove this woman around and talk darkly about stoning, but scribes and Pharisees are lawyers and they know that a trial is what is needed. They are up to something. They have caught her *in flagrante* so it is certainly all a bit excitable, a bit edgy. There is that nasty, prurient malice directed at this good time girl. No sign of the man, her partner in crime, this is men getting worked up about women. And then there is the malice aimed at Jesus. If he lets her go he is in breach of Jewish Law, if he says 'kill her' he is in breach of Roman Law. This is a trap and it is clever. It is mob handed and mob minded. It is the kind of sympathy you expect to find on the street, 'What would I do with her? What would I do with her? ...I would throw stones at her'.

Jesus bucks the trend. He doesn't get swept up in the excitement. He doesn't take up a position, rush into judgement, or rush to distance himself. Notice that mood is infectious, gets us in the guts and draws us in. Jesus does not succumb. He does the thing you least expect. He looks down, not up. He draws with a finger in the ground, listens, thinks, waits. The scribes and Pharisees are interested in what she has done – they caught her in the act. It is the act that matters; no one asks her what she has to say about it. She is an object, an issue, a crime, she is not a person.

Jesus famously tells them that the one without sin can cast the first stone. It is irony of course, because he is without sin. He could do that. His challenge to them is to stop looking at her and start looking at themselves. And it is in that moment, it is in that experience that this story take flight.

The problem we have with sin is that we rarely take it to heart. It is a joke – chocolates called Temptations, it is the video game of seven sins. ‘Go on, have a second helping, be wicked’. That is one way of taming the enemy, refuse to take it seriously. The other way is to keep it out there all the time. We do that when we think of sin and temptation as sinful things: the chocolates, the whisky bottle, sex, money; or sinful acts: theft, adultery, cruelty. That is exactly what the scribes and Pharisees did – we caught her in the act. Do you see? They do not take sin to heart, it is always out there, over there. It is what *she* did and even if it is what *I* did, it is over, it happened then when I got cross, or drunk, or when I was stupid. It was an event and it is done.

Challenged to stop thinking about the woman and the sin that is out there, challenged to think about themselves, the scribes and Pharisees get shifty. They shuffle their feet, they drift away. Jesus and the woman are left alone. St Augustine summed that moment up:

*Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia*

*Relicti sunt duo* Two are left, *misera et misericordia* misery and mercy. The scribes and Pharisees leave, the crowd disperses and just two are left: misery and mercy. It is a neat turn of phrase, but if your read Latin in bed you will know that Augustine is doing something more sophisticated than you might think. The words we use at this time of year are significant, they matter. We talk about penitence - that comes from a Latin word poenitentia. We think it is about being sorry, but the root of the word poena has much more to do with paying a debt, or incurring a punishment. The Greek word is metanoia and that has a different meaning again – it is amendment of life.

Lent asks some questions of us - do we need to pay our debts and suffer punishment; ‘you do the crime you do the time?’ Or, do we need to amend our lives? Augustine hints at something more. That word *misericordia* he uses means mercy, but it combines two words *misera* which means misery and *cor* which means heart. So when he says

*Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia*

He is actually saying, *two were left, misery and misery taken to heart*. If you want to know what to do with Lent this is where you can start. This is the time to stop thinking that sin is out there and to recognise it is in here. Sin is not just what we do occasionally or what other people do a lot; sin is who we are and what we are like. Take that to heart. And then, when you have done that and you have begun to be sorry, (really sorry), remember that Christ comes to you and takes *you* to heart.

Two are left misery and misery taken to heart  
*Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia*