

Wednesday 18th February 2026

Ash Wednesday

Readings:

Isaiah 58: 1-12

John 8: 1-11

“Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again”.

That sounds like quite a tall order.

Do not commit adultery again. Perhaps that isn't such an unreasonable demand, isn't outside our own understanding. For the woman caught in the act of adultery – being told not to commit adultery again, gives her clear boundaries, enables her to know that she has done something wrong, but also, that she has been saved from the punishment which, according to the law, was what she should expect – the punishment of death, by stoning.

But Jesus doesn't tell the woman not to commit adultery again. He tells her not to sin again. That is much harder. Not to sin at all. Not to set a foot wrong. Not to let slip a quip which causes offence. Not even to think a thought which she might later regret.

Do not sin again!

On one level, you can imagine the woman going her way with every good intention. She has committed a sin. And not just any sin. A sin which carries the punishment of death by stoning. And then, Jesus comes into the frame.

This is not a safe space for Jesus. He didn't seek out this woman. This woman didn't seek out Jesus. There was no relationship or intention between them. Their coming together was purely as a result of the scribes' and the Pharisees' intention to use the woman to trick Jesus.

This is one of their more astute moments. They bring the woman to Jesus, knowing that he has a liberal, caring approach to the law, knowing that he puts people before rules, and they challenge him. This woman has been caught. Not only committing adultery, but in the very act. There can be absolutely no doubt of her guilt, and therefore when they ask Jesus whether the law should be upheld, there is no way that he can deny it.

If Jesus tells them not to stone the woman, then he has broken the law of Moses, and the full force of the Jewish leadership will come down on him. If he tells them to go ahead and stone her, his love of his people, his compassion, his care for others, is no longer a reality, and the people who have come to hear him teach, will turn their backs on him.

He is stuck, between the end of his ministry through the disappointment of his people, and the end of his ministry through the opposition of the temple authorities.

Jesus recognises that sin is sin. This woman has sinned, but so have the scribes, so have the Pharisees, so have all those who are listening and waiting for a response from him. They may not all have committed adultery. They may not all have committed sins for which the penalty is death by stoning. But they are all human. They all know the law of Moses, and they all know that they have broken it somewhere.

And so, Jesus captures all sin into one, and invites them to go ahead and stone this woman, as long as the first stone is thrown by one who has not sinned.

Suddenly, the hypocrisy, the realisation, the judgement, falls on those who accused the woman. Jesus has not taken sides, he has not chosen right or wrong, but he has drawn all people into the same picture, and helped them to see that they are all sinners.

Today, on Ash Wednesday, we begin our Lenten journey. In a few minutes' time, we will all have the opportunity to have the sign of the cross made on our foreheads, recognising our creation from the dust of the earth, and the dust to which we will return.

And as the sign of the cross is made, we will hear the words, "turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ".

That is where our Lenten journey begins today. Turn away from sin. Be faithful to Christ. Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again.

I am quite sure that this is easier said than done. That even with the best of intentions, not one of us will achieve it. Just as I am quite sure that the woman caught in adultery did not achieve it either.

But what she did, was to go on her way knowing that, despite all that had happened, Jesus loved her enough to save her. He saved her by his words to the scribes and the Pharisees. He took her sin, took the risk, bore the repercussions on himself, and gave a response which showed himself to be beyond side taking, beyond favouritism, and beyond reproach.

As we enter this season of Lent, we know how it will end. We know, that in forty days time, we will hear Jesus again, set a criminal free from sin, as on the cross, he makes the promise to the penitent criminal hanging beside him – today you will be with me in paradise.

For all who come to Jesus, whether they come as the criminal on the cross did, intentionally, or whether they came as the woman who had committed adultery did, brought by others, for all who come, there is hope, there is redemption.

And Lent reminds us of that, that despite hearing those words today, "turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ", we will fail. But we fail, knowing that our hearts are true, that we seek Christ's forgiveness, that in penitence, we travel through Lent, and that by its end, we will stand at the foot of the cross, watching the man who knows no sin, bear all of our sins, just as he bore the sins of the woman caught in adultery.

And all of this, we do, in the knowledge of the Resurrection. All of this, we do, knowing that death itself is overcome. All of this, we do, recognising that with the criminal on the cross, the promise of paradise stands firm.

So, as we hear those words today, go on your way, and do not sin again, turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ, let us begin this Lenten journey with all the gratitude, dedication and enthusiasm that we can imagine the woman caught in adultery showing, as we know Jesus' love, and recognise that with him we are saved, and let us walk with him as he carries our sins to his cross.