



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent-Year C-April 7<sup>th</sup> 2019

***Readings: Isaiah 43: 16-21, Psalm 125, 1 Paul 3: 8-14,***

***John 8: 1-11***

Several light years ago, when our children were young, we went, with Christian friends and their families, on holiday to the beautiful Turkish resort of Olu Deniz. Tiring of the relentless beauty of the lagoon and the daily luxury, I announced that I was off to explore the neighbouring inland town. Any takers? Our friend, Daphne, a pretty, vibrant, ex Navy mum volunteered. An hour later we found ourselves marooned in a one horse town whose entire main street was dedicated to serving full English breakfasts to the kind of English people you go on holiday to avoid. With three hours to kill before the return bus we finally discovered a native shop full of Turkish dresses and dived inside. On the wall, written in pencil, was a Turkish menu. Yes, indeed, they did serve food. We were ushered through a curtain to a pavilion in the back garden, where, shaded from the sun by silk drapes, we lounged, in opposite corners, on huge cushions and gazed up to the mountains. It was a delightful meal and an enchanting couple of hours. Fully fed we re-emerged through the curtain into the shop where a portly middle-aged lady was trying on a dress under the critical eye of her chubbier friend. Actually it looked quite nice and I volunteered the compliment, 'I

hope you won't be offended if I say how nice you look in that.' The critical friend rounded on me, pointed her finger and roared in broad Scots 'I know who you are ! You're Robbie Low – and that's no your wife!" 'Right on both counts', I replied, 'May I ask by whom I have the pleasure of being addressed.'

My accuser turned out to be a member of my local free church, a viper's nest of exiles from other conventicles.

I have never forgotten the look on her face and I recall it whenever I read the description of the accusers in today's Gospel of the woman taken in adultery. She was furious, triumphant, accusatory, delighted at supposedly catching me out, excited by my imminent fall from grace – eyes burning like rats on a soil heap, face contorted with rage.

It was all I could do not to laugh. As I explained to Daph, on the bus back, my accuser would unleash her scandalous gossip on the parish just a few weeks before her own minister would be sued by his wife for divorce as, I knew, he had been 'playing away' with a colleague for some time.

Of course the situation in the Gospel is much graver. We live in a society which has moved, in my lifetime, to a broad acceptance of infidelity as almost normative. We have arrived at a situation where, to quote a dark joke of a theologically conservative friend of mine, the next Pope but one will be able to announce that 'There are no sexual sins – just preferences.' Infidelity used to be considered wrong but remained legal. In ancient society it was immoral, illegal and FATAL.

It was, quite literally, a mortal sin.

We do not know why this woman was in the situation of mortal peril. Was she unhappily married, tied to a miserable 'arrangement'? Was her husband cruel? Or was she just a loose woman, a sexual 'chancer', a hazard to marital shipping. We don't know. What we do know is that there is something wrong here. You can't, so I am reliably informed,

commit adultery on your own. It takes two to tango. The guilty man is missing from the murderous object of this kangaroo court. The excited, enthusiastic, bloodthirsty crowd want some answers from Jesus. Is He in favour of the Law or in favour of moral anarchy? Gotcha !

Jesus response is, for me, one of the most memorable moments of the Gospel – one of those almost unnoticed details that confirm its authenticity. He doesn't answer the question. He writes in the dust. He is not playing for time. He is giving the baying mob time to pause and reflect. He brings the momentum of hatred to a shuddering halt.

He also acts with significance. The writing in the dust – what did He write – is an echo of the action of the Divine Word at creation. As the Second Person of the Trinity, He wrote in the dust and created Man and the Woman drawn from his side. His action reflects our origin and unity and complementarity.

Then, and only then, having reset the parameters of the debate, He speaks.

'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.'

That is what you call 'setting the bar very high'. There is only one person there who could do that – Jesus Himself. Only the sinless one can judge – as He will. And then another beautiful utterly authenticating detail – One by one they begin to leave 'beginning with the eldest'. They have the longest track record. They look into their hearts and don't like what they see. They are aware that most frequent description of God's relationship with His people is that of marriage and God's most frequent complaint is of His people's monotonous infidelity, their regular adultery, their flirting with other gods, their promiscuous love of other things before God. Adultery is not just about sex. It is about

unfaithfulness – the failure of love. It is about what cuts us off from life. It is the dreary list of failures that we bring to the confessional for forgiveness, for healing, for grace. We wait for Christ to rewrite us in our mortal dust. We wait on death row for the words of life. Guilty but not condemned we are given back our lives by the Cross of Christ. How will we respond to His amazing, generous love?

In the old rite, after absolution, after the assurance that we have been set free and not condemned to die in our sins, we hear the words of Jesus to the woman taken in adultery. 'Vade in pace et iam amplius noli peccare.'

Go in peace and do not sin again. The One, crucified by our sins, raises us up and frees us and sends us on our way into life. Slowly, surely, we learn the glorious liberty of faithfulness and the joy of thankful hearts.