

## Fifth Sunday in Lent

*“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* John 8, 1-11

*“I forget the past and strain ahead for what is still to come.”*  
Philippians 3, 8-14



A surgeon and his wife were invited to dinner at the home of friends. The surgeon was enjoying a drink in the kitchen with his host who was about to carve the roast. “Would you like to do the honours, Doc?” his friend asked. The surgeon politely declined. As the host carved the roast, he teased: “What do you think of my technique, Doc? I’d make a pretty good surgeon, don’t you agree? It’s all in the wrist. Watch out, I might take your job from you.” The doctor laughed good-naturedly, having been the target of such jokes many times before. When he had finished his carving, the host proudly turned to his friend and asked: “Well, what’s your verdict, Doc?” The surgeon paused a moment and said: “Not bad. Now, let’s see you put it back together.”

Most of us are fairly good at taking things apart - particularly other people, but inept at putting them back together. Like the Scribes and Pharisees in today’s gospel, we are able, with surgical precision, to uncover evil, sin and failure in others. But Jesus turns the tables and challenges: “First of all, take a moment to look at the evil, sin and failure within yourselves.”

As I reflected on today’s readings, I kept recalling the public outrage and media frenzy directed at Dennis Ferguson, the recently released paedophile who had been gaoled for the abduction and sexual abuse of three children in 1988. Newspapers carried the headline: “JUDGE FREES MONSTER”. Vigilante groups of residents hounded Ferguson wherever he went to live. He was forced to relocate at least three times in Queensland before taking refuge in New South Wales where he was greeted by so much hostility that the State Government passed a law allowing him to be evicted from public housing. Such public outing has strong resonance with today’s story of the public humiliation of the woman caught in adultery, and illustrates not only what long memories we have for the sins of others but how we like to have a hand in meting out punishment. We are adept at “stoning” the Dennis Fergusons of this world, yet blind to our own prejudices and inadequacies.

Today’s gospel story confronts us all as it calls us to put down the stones of indignation and anger that we all pick up to throw at others on occasion. Jesus challenges us to look into our own hearts and to locate the place where good and evil meet. He invites us to understand the disappointment and selfishness that drive us to do wrong and to reflect on the hurt our wrongdoing inflicts on others. He calls us to put aside our rationalisations and excuses and to imitate the love, compassion and mercy of God who knows our hearts better than we do ourselves. If we are to have any credibility in confronting the evils around us, we must start by confronting the demons within. We will never lift up others until we accept that we, too,

are fallen. We must look to our own healing before presuming to address the moral health of others.

That was the very challenge which Jesus put to the woman's accusers in today's gospel. When they had all slunk away, he turned to her and said: "Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more." (John 8, 11) Jesus does not deny the fact that she has sinned. He encourages her not to reoffend and to put the past behind her. That's a pretty tall order for a woman who has not only committed adultery but who has been publicly shamed for her crime. (Note that the man who was involved is not even mentioned. He apparently gets off scot-free.) The guilt she carries surely does not simply evaporate. She must be wondering how her husband will react and even struggling to forgive herself for an action whose consequences she knows would normally have been being stoned to death. Despite the support she receives from Jesus, she still has much to leave behind her. Yet Jesus very clearly urges her to leave the past behind and look forward to the future.

And it's that very same message that Jesus puts to us. Still, many of us struggle to be convinced that, no matter what wrong we have done, God forgives us. From the way they speak and act, many Christians still give the impression that they are afraid of "death and judgement", that they don't fully believe that God has forgiven them, that they are still far from being at peace with themselves. They still carry a burden of guilt. As a way of encouraging us, today's liturgy gives us an extract from Philippians in which Paul, who had a long history of violence against Christians and was implicated in the stoning to death of St. Stephen, can say with confidence: "I put the past behind me and strain ahead for what is still to come." Guilt locks us into the past. In today's gospel, Jesus invites us to be open to God's grace as it comes to us in the people, events and opportunities of the present and to look to a future full of hope.