

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2nd March 2022
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John 8 vv 1 -11

Jesus talks a lot about stones. He describes himself as the stone the builders rejected. He predicts the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem when not one stone will stand upon another. He asks if a when a child asks for food would a loving parent give the child a stone. He is tempted by the devil in the wilderness to turn stones into bread. He calls his chief disciple Cephas, Peter, rock. So many references that some people think Jesus trade was not as a carpenter but a builder.

And he stops a woman caught in adultery being stoned. Stoning in Jewish legal system of Jesus time involved the condemned person being taken and thrown into a pit or from a cliff – often the fall would cause death but if it didn't the stones would be thrown on them from above until they died. Stoning was the death penalty for a range a misdeeds in Jesus time and culture. In Jesus day it was the main way of punishing adulterous women and blasphemers – and lest we forget it is still a punishment meted out in certain dark corners of our world today.

The woman we heard about in our extraordinarily powerful Gospel reading today is an adulteress. She is very probably either naked or barely clad. Taken in the very act. And in this state she is brought to Jesus as a trap for him to fall in to. She is brought to him because he has been telling people there is another way of looking at the world. A way of looking that is about life not death. A way of looking that points beyond God's law to God's love.

Jesus is in Jerusalem and his words have deeply unnerved those in authority. Who does he think he is to say such things. And then this woman – we are not told the fate of the man. What a gift to them. Let us take her and confront him with the law and human sin. See how he looks at this.

We can see the trap and so could Jesus. If he condemns her to stoning then yes, he upholds the law of Moses, but where is this new message of life and love? And if he releases her from her punishment then he is exposed as a blasphemer – against God and his law – and then let this Jesus be stoned too.

Jesus remains silent and instead bends to write upon the ground. His fingers fashioning the dust with echoes of Eden when God made man for himself and without sin.

But the scribes and the Pharisees keep hectoring him: What do you say? And what does Jesus say? He says: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

Oh, it takes our breath away! How Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. The trap. Not just of the scribes and the Pharisees but the trap of all sinful humankind. The hating and the hurting and the desire to inflict our pain on others.

We wonder don't we what he wrote with his finger in the dust. After he has spoken Jesus bends down and continues to write. And as he writes this second time one by one the woman's accusers slink away. The oldest first and then the younger ones.

We do not know what he wrote but there is one very early interpretation which is compelling. Jesus is writing down the sins of the woman's accusers. One by one they see their sins written in the dust and held in Jesus words. You who have no sin – throw your stone. The oldest – if not the wisest – but certainly the ones with longer lists of their own sins are by no surprise the first to go.

When they have all gone Jesus finally looks up at the woman. We have a sense of timelessness in this encounter. Alone and the noise and anger and violence gone she is face to face with the only one who truly knows what sin can do. It separates men and women from each other and from the God who made them. In Jesus there is no separation, but there is still sin. Human choice has not changed from Eden. Though His were the hands that made us our choices are still in our own hands. The woman is challenged just as deeply as her accusers. Go, he says Go, and sin no more.

Put down the life you were living and begin again holding this moment, this encounter, this mercy, pity, power and love at work in your life from now on.

What we must put down. The men who brought the woman to Jesus would have had stones in their hands. Showing they were ready to act, ready to kill another for sins that were in their own lives. Stones in their hands. When they walked away one by one, we can imagine that some dropped the stones they were holding. Changed by what they had seen in the dust, heard in Jesus voice. But some would have kept hold of the stones. The sharp edges digging into their palms. Drawing not the woman's blood but their own.

What stones are we holding as Lent begins this year. After all the last couple of years have held, all that we are seeing unfold in our world on our screens it is not

surprising that we might feel like blaming and judging and throwing. It will probably not be great rocks of hate and violence, but the small gravel that erodes our relationships and spoils our lives. Nursed grudges and resentments, and new animosities. Things which separate us from each other and from God. That person on the TV or Twitter saying those things I don't like. That person on the tube wearing/ not wearing a mask. That person at work, on my road – in my family – in my way. The stones I have just picked up and the ones I have clenched in my fist for so long the pain has become part of who I am.

It is because it has been so hard, because there are so many things to throw stones at that we need to give ourselves a break. And we give ourselves a break by giving up all those stored up hurts and fears and aches. Only we and the God who made us know what they are - but for our world and for ourselves may this Lent be a time of the letting go of stones. Amen