

Ash Wednesday 2017

St David's Eucharist

Last week we had a very nice French woman called Marianne staying with us as part of the exchange our diocese has with the diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux. She was an organist at one of the large churches in Caen and a teacher of the instrument at the conservatoire at Le Mans. She was also a lay Dominican.

In the course of one of our conversations we also discovered she had a Jewish background. Her father, I think it was, had converted to Christianity when he was young. He was now a great age and had only fairly recently talked to her about it. When she asked what was the trigger that moved him towards Christianity he replied simply, 'forgiveness'.

I thought of that as I read this evening's gospel. It tells us about sin and forgiveness and Jesus' approach to both.

In their desire to put Jesus on the spot and find him guilty of denying the law of Moses his accusers are blind to their own sinfulness. In setting the moral bar high they find they cannot jump over it themselves. So Jesus reveals to them their hypocrisy and maliciousness in posing the question

they do, by the simple expedient of inviting the sinless one among them to cast the first stone at the adulteress.

It's a high risk strategy of course; somebody might just have done it. But they get the point. The finger they wanted to point at the woman turns instead to point the question back at them. Well, what about you first?

There's a story of Donald Soper, the great Methodist preacher, who used to speak regularly at Hyde Park Corner. One day when he was talking about sin a man from the crowd called out 'I've never done anything wrong'. Soper paused, and said to the man, 'Are you married?' Taken aback, the man said yes, he was. 'Well, then', said Soper, 'I'll come and talk to your wife after I've finished and see if she agrees with you.'

So there's our first lesson on this Ash Wednesday as we start Lent. What about us? Can we invite our Lord in this holy season to help us answer that question as truthfully as we can bear. Jesus wants to help us see ourselves more realistically, he wants us to be more self-aware, because that will help us to live amongst others more gently and less judgmentally.

Then the other thing we learn from this passage is how gracious God is with those who miss the mark in their lives.

The woman's fault has been brought out into the open and somehow by doing that its power to harm her is already undone. Jesus, especially in John's Gospel, is the source of light in people's lives. Brought there before him, the woman discovers that it is a light that heals. Jesus does not condemn her for her past failure. Instead he frees her.

The word the NT uses almost invariably for forgiveness has at its root the sense of letting go. Jesus uses the word when Lazarus comes out of the grave, bound in strips of cloth. 'Unbind him', he says, 'let him go'. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Let us go as we let others go.

Forgiveness does not erase the past but rather it frees us from its power to harm us. It allows healing to take place. As we forgive others so we set them free, even as we have been set free. Free to love again, for it's in loving we discover who we really are: children of the God who first loved us and seeks not to condemn but to save us.