

Sunday Morning Resources

Wednesday 5 March 2025 - Ash Wednesday

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58.1-12; Psalm 51.1-18; 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; John 8.1-11

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Valerie Kilner, Permission To Officiate (Retired), Somersham and Ramsey

Caught red-handed! There was no way in which this woman in this Gospel reading could deny that she had broken that law of God - you shall not commit adultery. And her accusing Pharisees had been hot on pointing out the consequences of failing to keep that law.

I wonder where her equally guilty partner was in all this? The Law prescribed death for *both* the guilty parties. He also had sinned.

The woman must have been terrified, scared to death, because the penalty she faced for being found guilty was death by stoning.

According to the law of Moses, there had to be a trial before anyone could be put to death by stoning. Perhaps this was her trial. At least two witnesses had to testify against her and, if she were found guilty, those witnesses would be the throwers of the first stones.

We must assume that the witnesses had taken her to some Pharisees who, presumably with the witnesses, had then brought her to Jesus. He already had a crowd gathered around him, so their confrontation was very public. What would be Jesus' judgement on the woman?

Jesus knew full well that the Pharisees were trying to catch him out. He might agree with the Pharisees that she should be stoned. That would make him less popular with the crowds. If he said she should not be stoned, he would be saying that the law of Moses could be broken with no penalty. In addition, only the Romans could execute so, if he agreed that she should die, he would be in opposition to the Romans. The Pharisees must have thought they had presented Jesus with a no-win situation.

Why did Jesus write in the dust? We don't know. But it would have given breathing space, perhaps bringing a calm moment into the confrontational atmosphere while they waited for his response. And what a response! Not a verdict on the woman's behaviour but a judgement on all present. If she is going to be stoned, let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!

Those witnesses who would have been expecting to throw those first stones must have been perplexed. Everyone there must have been challenged. Who would dare to claim that they were sinless? There was nobody fit to throw the first stone.

Only Jesus – the sinless one. She was guilty but he had nothing but compassion for the guilty woman.

I wonder whether Jesus was holding his breath when he bent down to write in the dust again – giving time for his question and its implications to sink in. And they did sink in – and those who had brought her to Jesus simply walked away. They had failed to trap him.

But Jesus and the woman remained – and the crowd who had been listening to Jesus. It is difficult to know what she was thinking. We hear this personal conversation: Where were those condemning her to death? Gone. And Jesus doesn't condemn her either. Jesus had not only shown compassion, he had been merciful.

What is mercy? A dictionary definition tells us it is compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

Jesus had the power to punish her but had shown her compassion and forgiveness. She was free – on condition. She must not sin again.

We don't know what happened to her. We can only guess that she must have at least been very grateful to Jesus for giving her back her life.

This seems to point to one way in which we can see these next forty days of Lent. Forty because Jesus was tempted for forty days and did not sin. We know that, like this woman and those who condemned her, we have sinned. We are caught red-handed.

We also know that as we trust Jesus, and believe he tells us the truth, that he does not condemn us but sets us also free from the penalty of our sin.

At the end of Lent, we shall focus on the events of Good Friday. As Jesus died on the cross, he took our guilt and our shame away from us and on to himself, freeing us. He paid the penalty for us – and died. He overcame death with new life which he gives to all who believe through his Holy Spirit in us – helping us to start afresh and to become more like him.

One liturgy for Ash Wednesday contains these words: By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.

We, like the woman and her accusers know we are not sinless. We know that we are called to repent – to sin no more – to change. We reflect on what that might mean for us, individually and collectively.

As I was reading recently, I came across this challenge: do we wallow in our sinfulness or rejoice in God's mercy and forgiveness?

It is possible in Lent almost to wallow in our sins. It is right that we should examine ourselves, acknowledge where we have been or are being tempted and giving in. It is right that we should be asking ourselves how we might be being called to change.

But in all this, we should be rejoicing in God's mercy and forgiveness. We are forgiven! Jesus says to us: I do not condemn you. He has dealt with our wrong-doing and set us free for new life.

And living more and more in that truth, surely we will grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord. Amen.

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder how I would have reacted to Jesus if I had been in that crowd.
- I wonder how the guilty woman reacted to Jesus.
- I wonder whether I really do believe that God forgives me when I am truly sorry.
- I wonder how I am being asked to change knowing that I am forgiven.

Suggested intercessions

*Often on Ash Wednesday, the prayers of intercession take the form of a litany.
The following is based on prayers taken from Lent Holy Week Easter published by Church House.*

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father.

Hear our prayers, O Lord our God.

Hear us, good Lord.

Govern and direct your holy Church; fill it with love and truth; and grant it that unity which is your will.

Hear us, good Lord.

Give us boldness to preach the gospel in all the world and to make disciples of all the nations.

Hear us, good Lord.

Give your people grace to hear and receive your word and to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

Hear us, good Lord.

Bring into the way of truth all who have erred and are deceived.

Hear us, good Lord.

Guide the leaders of the nations into the ways of justice and peace.

Hear us, good Lord.

Bless those who administer the law that they may uphold justice, honesty, and truth.

Hear us, good Lord.

Give us the will to use the resources of the earth to your glory and for the good of all.

Hear us, good Lord.

Help and comfort the lonely, the bereaved on the oppressed.

Hear us, good Lord.

Heal the sick in body and mind and provide for the homeless the hungry and the destitute.

Hear us, good Lord.

Father, you hear those who pray in the name of your Son: grant that what we have asked in faith we may obtain according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Coventry Litany of reconciliation is prayed at noon every weekday in Coventry cathedral.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred that divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

Father, forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own.

Father, forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth.

Father, forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

Father, forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

Father, forgive.

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women, and children,

Father, forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves, and not in God,

Father, forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. Amen.

Suggested hymns/songs

Forty days and forty nights

Be thou my vision

O for heart to praise my God

Father, hear the prayer we offer

O for a closer walk with God

Forgive our sins as we forgive

Lead us heavenly Father, lead us

Activities to accompany the service

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- reflectionary.org – lectionary-based resources
- engageworship – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)