

## Casting the First Stone

Shortly, we will be coming to celebrate the sacrament of communion. Jesus said do this as often as you can in memory of me. But this is more than a ritual, it's a remembering of the significance of what Jesus has done for us; it's important that we remember what the symbols represent; the bread, Jesus' body broken for us; the wine, his blood shed for us, so that we might be forgiven. This is how God has made a way for us to know him and to walk in his ways.

At the centre of the sacrament is the Grace of God, which has come to us through Jesus Christ. I said last week, that Jesus just didn't speak about grace but that he lived in grace and walked in grace.

In our reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul speaks of the difference that grace brought to his life. Paul considered himself to be the worst of all sinners, he was responsible for the death of Christians before God's grace entered his life, and years later he could write a letter like Romans commending the grace of God and encouraging others to receive it and walk in its light.

He begins his letter with the words, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ and set apart for the Gospel of God". The actual word servant would originally be closer to the word slave, and when he speaks of Jesus, he calls him "Jesus Christ our Lord". In those words, Paul is saying that he belongs to Jesus; the word Lord originally meant master, as a slave owner would be to his slaves; but Paul saw it as a joy to serve Jesus in this way; it was not a burden, but it brought him freedom.

We all serve someone or something in this life, who am I serving? Who are you serving? Paul knew the joy of serving Jesus, for it brought him forgiveness and filled his life with love.

Today, I want us to meet a woman who came to know the grace of Jesus, just as Paul did and many others.

My sermon is told today through the eyes of the woman who we are told was caught in the act of adultery.

As you know we are travelling through the gospel of John and this is today's reading.

God, help me from these men. I know that my life is a mess; I know that I have lost my way; but to be thrown at the feet of these self-righteous judges. God, I feel so guilty, they are exposing my life and they all know what type of person I am.

Who are they to judge another person. They think they are so holy with their long robes and lengthy prayers.

What now God... I look up and see them clutching their large stones, ready to split my head open and to watch me die slowly, and then they will leave me lying to die on the ground, food for the wild animals, and they will walk away feeling smug and righteous for they have got rid of a sinner. They will think a reward is waiting for them in heaven.

God, I know that I have committed a sin, but what about the man who was also involved? Why didn't they bring him here, and make him to suffer this humiliation. Yes, God, us women, are the least, they even say that we are like Gentiles.

We have no rights, they can divorce us at a whim; burn the toast and you are divorced; cast out, no one to support us or to care for us.

But today something is different, there is such a large crowd, and they are standing around a man. Who is this man? They are listening to him and I wonder who this might be; suddenly I'm thrown at his feet, my dress half torn, my hair is a mess, and I feel so low and empty.

O God of mercy, be merciful to me, I say to myself, sobbing and breaking my heart.

God, they are all looking at me, they are all laughing; I can feel their hatred, their eyes are full of anger, if looks could kill, I would be dead by now.

I remember my classes in the Jewish Sabbath school and I remember them teaching me that adulterers would be stoned to death. So, I await my punishment; I remember them telling me, that even if you are betrothed to be married, and found to have sexual relationships with a partner, you will be stoned. I know this! For I have seen it!

My mind is flashing back to my youth and happier days; oh God, to have my mother beside me now to protect me, to hold me, to tell me that everything would be ok. I feel so unloved!

But then they call out to the Rabbi, and they say “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery, according the law of Moses, we are commanded to stone such a person. Now what do you say?”

This woman! I have no name, I'm just a woman!

I could see what they are doing, they are testing this Rabbi; whoever he may be, they are quizzing him and they are using me as a test case.

I waited patiently for him to speak, but he didn't speak, rather he wrote something on the sand; I found it difficult to see what he wrote, the tears have blurred my eyes, but then I think it was in Aramaic and I wouldn't have understood it anyway, as I only have Hebrew, but they knew what was written, these self-righteous men. I'm sure that whatever he wrote, it was there to condemn them, was he writing their sins on the sand? or was he just be generous and thoughtful to me, by writing on the sand, he was taking the attention away from me, and making them focus on his words on the sand.

I don't know what he was going to say or how he was going to react; I knew that to disobey this law meant that he was not following the commands given to Moses. That was a crime!

But if he said, “Stone her”, two things immediately happen, he would not be seen to be merciful, and he would come into collision with the Roman law, for only they had the power to execute a person.

If he said this woman should be freed, then he was seen to be condoning adultery; and teaching people to break the law.

So, I looked up and saw their smug faces and I knew that he was trapped; they thought that they had impaled on the horns of dilemma. There is no way out for him! Whatever decision that he was to make, he would either be breaking rank with the law of Moses or the Roman law. That was the trap that these smug Scribes and Pharisees placed to lure this Rabbi.

This man had my life in his hands, two words from him and I would be dead, “Stone her” and that was the end.

But suddenly he lifts his head, and he looks at the Scribes and the Pharisees, his eyes were burning with anger, I knew he was going to say and do something that he might regret!

He turned and said to them, "Those without sin cast the first stone" – God, couldn't believe that anyone would dare challenge these men; they were called Pharisees which simply meant separated ones.

They were different, separated from common people; he looked into their eyes and hearts, he was asking a deep question about their own spiritual lives; "Whoever is without sin cast the first stone!"

I have never felt such silence, there was not a sound made, and their eyes were fixed on this Rabbi.

He turned the situation on its head, and the accusers become the accused... the righteous become sinners; it seemed that he was asking a deep question of them all; it was as if he knew their private lives; as if he had already seen deeper into their consciences.

Suddenly I remembered again my Torah from Sabbath school and I remember where it said, from the prophet Isaiah, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God".

Suddenly their smugness fell from their face and an embarrassed look came over them, they had been caught; they had become trapped, the hunted had become the hunter; and I realised that he was challenging them to think that no one is perfect. The separated ones were no different, that's what he is telling them!

Suddenly I felt relieved; I felt a glow in my heart; It's hard to describe but in that moment I knew that something had changed and the silence was broken! – for I heard a stone fall to the ground; I looked up, it was the stone of the Chief priest, the oldest amongst them, and then another stone and another, and suddenly I saw them starting to walk away, the oldest first and within minutes they had all scampered away, back into the holes that they had come from.

I looked up and there was no one else there, only me and this Man. The anger in his eyes has changed, and there was such compassion and love for me. I looked into his deep blue eyes and it spoke to me of mercy and forgiveness. He helped me onto my feet, and held me tight and he whispered into my ear, "Daughter, go in peace and sin no more!"

God, thank you! I couldn't believe it, one moment I was at death's door, the next, I'm being held by the most compassionate person, that I have ever met and it was a man.

God, I didn't want to leave that place; I wanted that moment to last forever, for suddenly I felt forgiven, renewed, cleansed. I felt that I had been given a second chance to live and I wasn't going to mess up again. I have so much to thank that man, who is he?

It's a wonderful story, Jesus said to her, "Go and sin no more..." Jesus releases this woman to go and live a new life, to make different choices; like some trapped animal, as she lay in the ground, he restores her and opens the cage and allows her to be released into the world again; but now that she is free, she is to go and live a different sort of life, a life that is pleasing to God, a life lived in fulfilling the two great commandments, "Love God and love your neighbour".

Can you imagine how she felt, one moment, she was on the ground waiting to be stoned to death, accused by these so-called righteous men; the next she is on her feet, and free to go and live her life in all its fullness. She would never forget that day when Jesus entered her life; she would never look back, for she tasted death and now she tastes life and freedom.

This is the gospel that the apostle Paul is speaking about; the gospel that brought him new life and hope, just like the woman. He writes, "Through him we received grace..."

George Whitefield, a Methodist preacher, one day saw criminals going to the gallows and he said, "There, but for the grace of God go I!" That's where that phrase has come from.

Today's story is about not being too quick to judge others until we have walked in their shoes. That was a common theme of Jesus - "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged." Don't try and take a speck out of someone else's eye when there is a log in your own. Only God has the right to judge for our judgement will always be imperfect as we are imperfect.

It's a story of the second chance. I can see the warmth of Jesus' smile on this woman as he said to her - "I know that you have messed up, but life is not finished for you, I am giving you another chance, a chance to step out and renew yourself."

One poet pens this,  
*How I wish that there was some wonderful place  
Called the land of beginning again,  
When all our mistakes and all our heartaches  
And all our poor selfish grief  
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door  
And never put on again.*

Well, there is such a place and that place is in the mercy and love of Jesus. That place is at the foot of the cross, where Jesus gave himself for poor sinful people such as you and me. That's why we have communion today, we do so because it reminds us that Jesus died to take away our sin, that Jesus gave everything, so that we can experience forgiveness and not judgement.