

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Very few of you drive over here to the abbey from Virginia for our Sunday Mass, but even those who do not live in that state might recall that in the mid-1990s the state of Virginia officially did away with the practice of parole for prisoners. The law was not retroactive, however, meaning that anyone sentenced before 1995 is, in principle, still eligible for parole. A while back a columnist for a newspaper down in the southeastern part of the state wrote an article about one of these pre-1995 prisoners, noting that the lawyer who was his attorney at the trial has since been disbarred for malpractice, that this lawyer had neglected to produce some significant pieces of evidence at the trial, and that at one of this prisoner's parole hearings an elderly member of the parole commission slept through the proceedings. While not positively advocating parole for this particular prisoner, the columnist certainly did raise doubts about the legitimacy of the man's continuing imprisonment.

What really struck me were some of the comments made by respondents to this and a similar column that appeared a few days later in that newspaper. The vast majority of those who wrote were adamantly opposed to parole. Here are a few direct quotations from their replies: "Let the prisoner rot." "Let him whine and whine." "Use the death penalty to rid us of these animals." "People do not change." "It has been proven that if you commit a crime you will do it again, over and over again. This has been proven." Other respondents regularly called those who advocate parole "bleeding heart liberals."

I couldn't help thinking of those remarks as I read today's Gospel in preparing this homily. Here in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel we have the account of a woman

whose actions made her strictly liable to the death penalty according to the Law of Moses, and there is no doubt that persons in ancient Israel were in fact stoned to death for adultery and certain other offenses. For that reason, the persons in this account who are putting Jesus to the test definitely have the law on their side. Since Jesus is elsewhere in the New Testament shown following various injunctions of the Mosaic Law, even saying in Matthew's Gospel that not one jot or tittle of that law would be done away with till it all came true, one can sense that he was indeed here faced with a genuine challenge. His response, of course, was not to ignore the law completely but rather to point out how all of his hearers were themselves liable to judgment. The fact that the oldest of the woman's accusers were the first to slink away shows that they had had many more years to accumulate their own guilty deeds!

The really important point, however, is not that Jesus bested these men in a dispute but that he recognized the possibility of conversion. He didn't excuse the woman as though she had done nothing wrong, but he refused to condemn her, telling her instead to go and from then on to sin no more—not, of course, in the sense that she would never do the slightest thing wrong, but that she should no longer commit adultery or any such serious sin.

For us, the lesson is twofold. First, that we ought to be far more concerned with our own behavior than with judging that of others, and second, that we ought never write someone off as being beyond the possibility of conversion. No one on earth ought ever be cast aside as hopelessly mired in sin or crime, and no true follower of Christ ought ever say, like one of those respondents to the columnist, that "People do not change." The very first words of Jesus in what is the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, are: "This is

the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” The Greek word here translated as “repent” means literally to “have a change of mind” or “change of heart,” in other words, “Be converted.” In this annual season of Lent we are called to take these words with special seriousness, with regard both to ourselves and to the way we view other people. *All* of us *can* change for the better, and with the help of God’s grace we may be confident that we *will* change. Let us pray for this kind of conversion as we continue our celebration this day, also remembering in our prayers those prisoners whom many in society have written off and who are therefore daily tempted to despair.