

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR C March 13, 2016

In his Lenten message Pope Francis asked that “the season of Lent in the Jubilee Year be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God’s mercy.” He began the Bull of Indiction, announcing the Extraordinary Year with the words *Misericordiae Vultus*, saying “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.” We see an example of that in today’s gospel in the case of the woman caught in adultery. What is missing, of course, is the man with whom she was caught in the act, if the accusation is true. We do not know what Jesus was writing on the ground. It could have been kind of like the writing on the wall in Daniel’s time in Babylon. The scribes and Pharisees kept asking him “Shall we stone her or not?” Jesus’ challenge, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” caused them all to drift away. Jesus’ final words to the woman who was left all alone with him are revealing. After saying, “Neither do I condemn you,” he added, “Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” He knew she was guilty.

Adultery is a serious matter, a matter for mortal sin when the other conditions are met. It is so destructive of the mutual trust that spouses need to persevere in their exclusive union of mind, body and lifetime together. Some are able to forgive their spouses’ infidelities, are reconciled and remain united. Others find it harder to forgive and separation follows. The human love story with its bond of fidelity sometimes fractured by human weakness and folly became the metaphor for God’s covenant relationship with his chosen people. “They will be my people and I will be their God.” On Mount Sinai the people promised they would keep God’s commandments and worship him alone. Israel’s turning to idols and disobeying God’s law was named adultery by the prophets. Pope Francis says in his Lenten message, “Here is a true love story in which God plays the role of the betrayed father and husband, while Israel plays the unfaithful child and bride.” That love story culminates in the Father’s gift of his Son as ‘mercy incarnate’. He is the bridegroom John pointed to, who will give up his life to win over the love of his bride, the Chosen People, the Church.

Three of us here were at the diocesan Lenten Day of Reflection yesterday for religious brothers, sisters, and others in consecrated life. Presenter Sr. Mary Timothea Elliott gave us a different take from what we heard in today’s reading about memory. The Prophet Isaiah said “Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!” St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “...forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” Sr. Mary Timothea emphasized that memory is essential for the virtue of hope. In the Book of Genesis Jacob set up a rock to remind himself of his vision of the angelic ladder reaching to heaven. There are many other examples in the Bible. We do the similar thing with tomb stones and souvenirs to remind us of memorable places and people in our lives. Of course memory can have bad effects when we cannot forgive hurts, betrayals, and abuses of others. Or when we carry the burden of our own serious sins in the past although they have been forgiven.

Sister led us on a *lectio divina* through Psalm 103. At the beginning the psalmist admonishes do not to forget the good things the Lord has done for you. The first thing mentioned is that God forgives all your iniquity, your sins. That is sheer mercy. For as Paul says I have no “... righteousness of my own based on the law. It comes through faith in Christ.” Jesus has made

real God's unconditional love for us who are made in his image. Remembrance of God's past mercies should give us hope as we go through life's dark valleys that they are not exhausted. We give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his mercy endures forever. What reason then is there for despairing of God's mercy, no matter how far we fall away.

Before we turn back to the altar I want to share with you a story of prison ministry. It is in a letter I received last week from a prison in Texas. The author wrote: "Currently the Lord has allowed me to live on a Christian faith-based wing. We have daily Bible readings and classes three nights a week. Because of my teaching background I was made an educational tutor, teaching science, math, and English. Most of the guys here never graduated highschool, so we prepare them for the G.E.D. and then college. For our parish here at the prison I am a lector and R.C.I.A. facilitator." The man who wrote me this has completed ten years of his forty year sentence, so thirty more years of incarceration to go. That is amazing grace, isn't it? Another name for mercy.

Back to the altar we conjure up memories of past events to make them real in the present. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He has won for us the abiding mercy of God through his sacrifice on the cross and his conquering Satan and death by his resurrection. To him with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, honor, praise and obedience now and forever.