

## Homily for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent 2022 Year C

Adultery was a very serious offence under Jewish law, so serious that it was punishable by stoning to death. Laws like that put the fear of God into you. You really thought twice before doing something like that, especially if you were a woman. Perhaps it was loneliness, or a strong compulsive need, but whatever it was, it was strong enough to risk death, and the risk for the woman in the Gospel did not pay off, she was caught and sentenced to death.

How sweet it was for her to hear Jesus' words that she was forgiven and that she was free to go and sin no more.

Thus, the possibility of forgiveness of sins and the sincere commitment to a new way of life, has always been an important part of Christian belief and practise. But in realistic terms it is not always possible to radically change from a sinful habit of life to one of virtue, especially if that particular sin is a compulsive one.

The spirit may be very willing, but often the flesh is very, very weak.

If you read St Augustine's autobiography "Confessions", you come across this hilarious prayer of his, "Lord give me the gift of chastity and continence, but do not give it to me just yet".

Funny though it may be, that prayer is both psychologically and spiritually sound.

What I mean is this, that we must grow into the style or the standard of moral life that we aspire to. To go away and sin no more is not that easy. Saint Augustine knew for a long time that his hyper sexuality was a real barrier to his own personal growth, but he also knew that he was not yet ready for the radical internal adjustment that chastity and continence would precipitate. So he unconsciously craved for a temporary respite. Now there is a great danger here that a lot of zealous religious people, including Saint Augustine, can fall into. They fall into a spiritual life of humourless and judgmental intensity. When they start with an iron determination to go away and sin no more but have not fully opened up and appropriately dealt with all that rubbish and debris that there was in their unconscious, it becomes blocked and festers

inwardly and sets up a fearful stench of decay. And this may then be projected upon any individual or object that this zealot dislikes.

Hence, sometimes, the terrible acts of cruelty that have been perpetrated in the name of religion are all rooted in this false spirituality.

This is what happened to Saint Augustine. His radical conversion of life led him to speak and write about human nature in a very bleak and pessimistic way. He could not see any redeeming features in the joyful and sensuous life that he lived before he became a Christian, to the extent that he and his followers concluded that all pleasurable and sensuous feelings were the work of the devil.

This overly puritanical view of life prevented them from dealing with their own sensual feelings when they came back again, as they always do, and it spilled out into hatred and persecution.

Now these two can happen to each one of us, in differing ways. If, in our iron determination not to sin anymore, we do not first try to understand and properly deal with the reasons we get bogged down with that particular sin in the first place, we end up not just loathing the sin, but also the sinner, the person who in their lives is guilty of that particular sin, be that ourselves or another person.

Part of the vehemence of those who would have stoned the adulterous woman, until she was crushed and bleeding to death, would have come from a loathing of their own sexual natures., misinformed by a puritanical religious zeal.

Anyone who is living with a strong sinful habit in their lives, needs to change that life. Christ's words, "go away and sin no more", are a promise of God's forgiveness and healing. We, on our part, must be careful that we do not act in our zeal in such a way that we block God's healing. We cannot do it all by ourselves and God does not expect that. What we have to do when we start to change our lives, is to begin with a lot of gentleness and patience with ourselves.

We have to learn to quietly wait on God. In the privacy of our hearts, we need to come to know and understand the feelings, the emotions, and the reasons that have driven us into that particular sin.

What is freely confronted is always less poisonous than that which is denied and secreted out of a sense of propriety or guilt.

God forgiveness is instant, but the healing of our wounded natures may take a fair bit of time, patience, and perseverance.

To sin no more is the ideal, the goal. With some sins that can realistically happen overnight if the goodwill and the intention is there. It is real wisdom to allow ourselves a little time and space to blossom and grow into the full and healthy moral and spiritual lives that God calls us to.