

## **SERMON FOR LENT I / ASHING SUNDAY | 26.02.2023**

Genesis 2: 15-17; Romans 5: 12-19; St John 8: 1-11

**“Caught red handed!”**

**It is almost impossible to ignore the smug satisfaction on the part of the self-righteous leader of the group who had ‘caught’ this young girl in our Gospel story. Nor do we need the equivalent of a tabloid newspaper to provide all the salacious details of what she had been up to, or to help us imagine the sheer terror on her part as she is dragged out of her house and paraded through the streets by a crowd hoping to make an example out of her in front of Jesus. You can almost hear some vicious person in the crowd saying ‘Stoning, stoning! Stoning’s too good for her...’**

**(Sadly this isn’t just a story from ancient history either: this kind of barbaric injustice is still being meted to women in Afghanistan even now...)**

**Yet we can’t stay with just that thought because these stories invite us, as we begin Lent, to do more than take pity on this girl and her contemporary sisters – though we do that with all our heart. What we are being invited to do is to look again at the whole issue of ‘blame’.**

**If we read beyond the beginning of the Adam and Eve story that we heard a moment ago, you will remember the scene moves on to where God has just discovered that that his ban on eating from the Tree of Life has been broken. In panic Adam is quick to find something, anything, to deflect attention from what he has done - so under God’s angry gaze he mumbles, *The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.***

**And as soon as Eve begins to feel the pressure turning onto her she looks round for scapegoat too: *Then the women said, The serpent deceived me and I ate...* It wasn’t my fault, Lord, it was someone else. It was Eve. It was the serpent. And so it has always been: we look endlessly for someone else to be found guilty, anyone - so long as it isn’t us.**

**One of the key foreign stories of this week has been the case of Shamima Begum who, at 15 and with two friends, slipped out of a London secondary school before being taken across the Turkish border and married off to an ISIS fighter in Syria.**

**Now the Court of Appeal has sided with the Home Office and has rejected her application to have her passport restored and she is, in effect, stateless – at the age of 23. And the question before the court: whose fault was all this? Was she, as many have contended, a willing volunteer for ISIS, willing to strap suicide belts on terrorists and even now a threat to national security?**

**Or was she in fact a sex slave, trafficked by unscrupulous agents at a time in her life when she was particularly susceptible to brain-washing by radical ideas posted on line?**

**Who is to blame? Shamima Begum or ISIS? Or are there yet other alternatives? MP David Davis suggested that the UK Border Control were at least partially to blame for allowing the three girls to leave the country in the first place. And Mr Justice Jay commented: *Essentially, and from the perspective of those responsible for the trafficking, the motive for bringing her to Syria was sexual exploitation to which, as a child, she could not give a valid consent.* Finding someone to blame in this case has not proved to be very easy.**

**As we begin Lent once more, we need to be reminded of what lies at the heart of this somewhat impenetrable second reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans.**

**There Paul, the highly trained Pharisee – with a reputation for understanding how the Law was supposed to work – spells out the difference between Judaism with its blame culture of an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth - and the new attitude to sin that Jesus revealed.**

**And the simple truth is that once we have understood that nothing we can do can wipe away our sin, and only what Jesus did on the Cross is capable of doing that, then we start to learn to take a rather different attitude to blame and to be much more accepting of other people.**

**Let's go back to that street scene with Jesus and the baying crowd hoping to see the young girl stoned. The story is beautifully told at this point as Jesus takes his time, writing in the sand as they keep on and on trying to get him to condemn the girl standing there in front of them.**

**And what happens next takes them all by surprise. *Which of you, he asks, is free of sin? Let him be the one to throw the first stone.* Which of these angry men could honestly say they hadn't broken the Law?**

***Throw your stones by all means - but remember, you have to be perfect yourself to be morally justified in doing that. As we suspected, not a single one of them knew themselves to be innocent and so they drop their stones and slink away.***

**It wasn't as if Jesus was saying that it was OK for the girl to sleep with someone who wasn't her husband. Of course he wasn't saying that. But his point is: who are we to start pointing the finger at others when, if the tables were turned and we were on trial, we wouldn't find a satchel load of things that needed forgiveness?**

**And to finish the story, what does Jesus do next? He quietly tells the girl *to go away and sin no more.***

**And, as you can see, she didn't even ask for his forgiveness! Why was that? Did she know what we know: that Jesus had already forgiven her? Because he can't help himself: because that is what love does.**

**What we are doing today, in our Ashing ceremony, is not 'necessary' in the strict sense. Christ has already died for us and has already wiped away the sin that holds us back. We don't even have to ask.**

**But it is really important for us to remember the debt we owe God; and it is good to be challenged to make the Lord's Prayer a reality: *forgive us our trespasses – as we forgive those who trespass against us.***

**That is why we should be so concerned about the Suella Braverman approach: that once someone has failed there is no way back; that 'national security' can be used as a cover for an attitude which is essentially 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.**

**Trying to pin the blame on somebody is incredibly difficult – and is usually not very helpful. Life is too complicated. And God doesn't do that either.**

**Far better to recall the words of the prophet Micah: *God has showed you what he requires of you: to act justly, to love mercy – and to walk humbly with your God.***