

Ash Wednesday Salisbury
2009

Jesus writes in the dust. Then he calls out 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' There is a little known textual variant, beloved of Roman Catholics. Bang; the woman falls to the ground, and Jesus shouts: 'Not you, mother.' Then he writes again.

But what was Jesus writing in the dust? Many early theologians suggested that he was writing down the sins of her accusers. When old Joshua is testing the weight of a stone, Jesus writes down: 'Mrs Levi, four years ago.' But this is surely wrong, because they have all committed the same sin, which is to use this woman as a honey pot to ensnare Jesus. She is just a pawn in their game. If Jesus says that she must not be punished, then he is in trouble with the religious authorities. If he says that she must, then all his talk of forgiveness is shown to be nonsense. They have trapped her in order to trap him.

This is a good way to think about sin. It is how we trap other people and even ourselves. We ensnare people in their past failures. We think of someone for ever as the person who failed, who cheated on his wife, who was caught telling a lie. We refuse to let them be free and different. We trap people in poverty. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, children are deliberately blinded so as to make them into effective beggars. We let ourselves be trapped, by the tabloid mentality of the mob, like these people ready to throw their stones. We let ourselves be trapped for ever in our own failures. A woman who had dabbled in prostitution came to see one of our brethren. 'But father', she said, 'I am a fallen woman.' 'No my dear, you merely tripped.'

We let ourselves be trapped in our weaknesses. Every day in Lent, we pray, 'Release us from the snare of the fowler.' I always think of the poachers, who soak grain in whisky, so that when the pheasants gobbled it up, they toppled over and could be quietly popped into bags! Some of us may sympathise with the pheasants! We may even trap those whom we love, keep an eye out for their mistakes, happily scoring points. Lent is a time for liberation. We must free each other from the traps we set. We must let the stones fall from our hands. We may be freed from our own failures. Go and sin no more.

Jesus is not just letting the woman off the hook. John says that 'he sat down and taught them.' And they call him 'Teacher.' Repentance is not feeling awful about yourself. It is not heaping up feelings of guilt. The Greek word for repentance, 'metanoia', means to see things differently. They open their eyes to see how they are using this vulnerable woman. Perhaps for the first time they see her humanity, even her beauty. During Lent we repent of our sins by learning to see each other and ourselves with compassion.

BBC Radio 4 recently announced that Cardinal Newman is soon to be beautified. It was a lovely slip of the tongue. The saints are those whose eyes are open to the beauty of others. We do bad things, all of us. The saints see that we are good people who do bad things. This is what religious life taught Thomas Merton. He fled to the Cistercian monastery because the

world seemed a wicked place. But a few years of religious life purified his eyes, and when he had to go down to the neighbouring city, he saw for the first time the deep goodness of people.

Later this year, a nineteenth century French Dominican, Jean Josephe Lataste, will be beatified. His moment of conversion was when he gave a retreat in a prison for women in 1864. Most of them were prostitutes. He was bowled over by a sense of their goodness, their humanity, and he founded a branch of the Dominican Sisters especially for these women. We have invited an Italian artist, Jean-Marc Cerino, to prepare the chapel for Lataste. Cerino etches portraits of prisoners on glass. You can only see the portrait if you hold the glass in your hands. You have to embrace the portrait, as it were, to see that the prisoner is a person. If you keep your distance, they are invisible, as the woman was to her accusers.

Twice Jesus writes in the dust. I guess that we are supposed to think of God's creation of Adam from the dust. God's finger shaped Adam as a living being from the earth. Remember God's finger reaching out to Adam in Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine chapel to give life to the limp body. And God goes on creating and recreating us.

Today we are marked with ashes. This is more than a reminder that we are mortal, and must return to dust. It is a sign that God is working on us still. God is still forming us living people. He is the potter moulding our clay, making us alive. Our Filipono novice master has a sign on his door, asking for the forgiveness of the novices: 'Have patience. God has not finished me yet.' We are all work in progress.

So repentance for sin is not feeling awful about ourselves, wallowing in self-hatred. Repentance is refusing to give up on ourselves and each other. It is letting God's finger work on our humanity and make us new. We make mistakes, shut ourselves into dead ends, do stupid and destructive things, but God is endlessly creative, never giving up. Michelangelo came across a botched piece of marble, which another sculptor had worked on, spoilt and thrown away. But Michelangelo reworked it, polished it, shaped it and made his statue of David.

So God's grace works the dust of our lives, always offering us life. Indeed today, the diocese is beginning a programme called 'Fully alive', quoting from a second century theologian, St Irenaeus, 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

So this Lent, let us repent of our sins. Let us release others from the traps that we make for them. God releases us from the snare of the fowler and invites us to be free again.