5 C Lent

*“Remember not the things of the past, the things of long ago remember not. See I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* Isaiah sings of the freshness, the newness, the rampant life on the earth, even in deserts and among the animals. The Lord opens a way in every situation, and brings the waters of life to the chosen people—the waters of baptism—a way into the tomb of death and a way of life that is unbelievably fresh.

Also, St Paul tells us that these waters of life are the light of the surpassing knowledge of the Lord Jesus and His power flowing from His resurrection, to know Christ and this power, by sharing in His sufferings and being formed into the pattern of His death.

The great doctor of the Church, St Augustine, helps to shed light on what is taking place in today’s Gospel story. He explains the Book of Psalms identifies truthfulness, meekness, and righteousness as characteristics of the long-awaited Messiah. The scribes and Pharisees know this, and had seen that Jesus exhibited all three of these—truth as a teacher; gentleness and meekness as a protector and in the face of His enemies; and righteousness as a person in all His actions. While they respected His truth and meekness, St Augustine asserts they were aggravated, tormented with envy by Jesus’ righteousness, and sought a way to disrupt Him.

The scribes and Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus into a choice between gentleness and righteousness, between mercy and justice. They reasoned the Law commanded that adulterers had to be stoned. Because it was the Law of Moses, it could not command anything unjust. So, if Jesus were to have mercy on the woman by arguing against her stoning, then Jesus would be seen as unjust, unrighteous. This would enable them to charge Jesus with being against the Law of Moses.

On the other hand, if Jesus were to agree with the Law and her stoning, then Jesus would be shown to be unmerciful. This undoubtably cause Him to lose influence with the people, as He was accepted and loved because of His gentleness.

Jesus’ response to their trap keeps the demands of justice and of mercy. He did not speak against the Law by saying that she should not be stoned, nor did He say she should be stoned. Instead, He put it back on the woman’s accusers: *“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* Here, Jesus confronts those who take upon themselves the indignant enforcement of the Law. Jesus has the right to demand that their case be totally lawful and their motives honest. But Jesus recognizes that they are not interested in the purpose of the Law. The spiritual state of the woman is not even in question, or whether or not she is penitent. Jesus knows that they are using her as a pawn to entrap Him.

Even further, the husband of the woman may have deviously arranged to have her caught by carefully pre-arranging that there be witnesses to her sin, instead of seeking to win back her love. Their base motives are not according to the Law, and Jesus has the right to challenge their attempt to secure a conviction. With this, Jesus forces the woman’s accusers to look inward at their own guilt in violating the same law. All depart, leaving only the woman and Jesus, the One without sin, the One who alone could cast the first stone. Instead, the woman receives mercy, with the admonition to sin no more.

 It was St Augustine who said that the Lord certainly did condemn the sin, but not the person. So, let us be honest enough to know we stand with the woman, caught in our sins? The Lord is merciful. He allows us space for correction—gives us the opportunity to repent, offers us pardon.