

## Ash Wednesday Reflection – Revd. Barnabas Leeke, Team Curate

### John 8.1–11 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup>Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. <sup>3</sup>The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, <sup>4</sup>they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. <sup>5</sup>Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ <sup>6</sup>They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup>When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ <sup>8</sup>And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup>When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup>Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ <sup>11</sup>She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

What is the point of penitence? Why should we have a special day to beat ourselves up about all the things that we have done wrong? This passage shows us that it is through a deeper understanding of our own failings that we become closer to Christ, and in coming closer to Christ we see who he really is.

The thing I most like about this passage is that it is the older men who leave first (‘elders’ in this translation). I like to think that for them it was immediately clear that they were unable to pick up a stone. The righteous indignation that had brought them here, either to condemn the woman or to trap this itinerant Galilean preacher, vanished as they were reminded of their own frailty and failings.

There is a wisdom that comes with age, that mollifies the zealous confidence of youth which believes that the world is relatively simple and everything can be solved by this new generation. As one travels through life, experiencing its joys and challenges, meeting others and understanding more about their inner lives and one’s own; it eventually becomes obvious that we all have our own crosses to bear.

As we enter into Lent we are reminded of Jesus’ time in the wilderness. Forty days of self-examination and testing, finding out where the weaknesses are and how to combat them. Our own lives, if we live them in pursuit of greater self-awareness, can be a similarly enlightening experience. As we come to see our own, secret brokenness we are able to find greater compassion for those in whom that brokenness is sometimes more visible. The elders caught up in accusation and trickery here clearly had plenty of experience of this to draw on when Jesus turned the spotlight back onto them. Jesus himself, perhaps more acutely aware than anyone of the ubiquity of sin in the world, really saw the person they had dragged before him, and had compassion.

So Ash Wednesday is not supposed to be a burden. It is not about berating ourselves for all the times we have ‘fallen short of the glory of God’. It is actually a time to come closer to God. To intentionally join Jesus in the wilderness so that in seeing our own contribution to the sin of the world, we can join him in his compassion for all who struggle in this very human existence. As we come closer to Jesus we might also come to an ever increasing understanding of who he is. The only one in that crowd who was able to pick up a stone chooses instead to put his life in the place of ours. The

solution to sin is not condemnation and punishment, it is the freely given grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

In that knowledge is not misery and mourning, it is freedom. Freedom to (as the writer of Hebrews says) “lay aside every weight and the *sin that clings so closely*,” and to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12.1-2, my emphasis). So today we can respond with confidence to the Common Worship invitation to confession as we, “call to mind our sins, in penitence and faith, firmly resolved to keep God’s commandments and to live in love and peace with all” (Common Worship invitation to confession).