

Wednesday 17 February: Ash Wednesday, 1.15pm Choral Eucharist

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; John 8.1-11

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are thrown at this start of Lent in our Gospel reading today straight into a highly charged scene, as Jesus is confronted by a volatile group who come using a woman whom they say has been caught in adultery, as bait to entrap him.

In the face of these cynical and bullying tactics, what does Jesus do? He bends down and begins to write in the dust. And the action stops. Time seems to stand still in the story. We get a chance to look around and see who is there.

It doesn't matter what he writes, although there are many theories about what it might have been. But through this action Jesus takes control, creates time and space within this tense situation to see what is really going on – what the real issue is. He makes space around himself and space for all those present, the temple crowds, the scribe and Pharisees, and most importantly for the woman. [and also space for us who are onlookers in the scene...]

When the scribes and Pharisees continue to press him, Jesus speaks into the situation. It is as if he has drawn a line in the sand choosing to stand alongside this unknown condemned woman, risking everything. He turns their accusation around - *'let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her'*. And so he by-passes the issue of the law and makes the accusers look to themselves. Aware of their own failings, one by one they fade away. Jesus and the woman are left alone.

In this way Jesus defuses the anger and fear, the tension and anxiety. He draws the woman, until now a non-person, into his space, a place of peace and forgiveness. From an object of shame, mere bait in a trap, facing stoning by death, Jesus has drawn her to stand before him as a person in her own right. In the space and peace he has recognised the truth of who she is. Someone who has failed, but also someone with dignity and her own voice. He speaks to her and she responds with respect. In offering her his unconditional forgiveness, the only one who could have thrown a stone, he offers her life and a future, rather than death.

Lent is about being drawn into the space that Jesus creates for us and around us, to have that conversation ourselves. Having space to hear him speak to us, allow him to confront the shame that we carry, whatever form that is in, and speak into it...and hear his forgiveness. It requires us to acknowledge it and not run from it. It can be quite a difficult conversation at times, as we try to avoid what we'd rather not confront or hear. It is not about what other people think but about whether we can stand upright before him.

In this service we each are invited to receive the sign of cross in ash on our own forehead and hear the words *'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.'* A sign of Christ writing with his finger in the dust of our lives – calling us to stand alongside him, and he with us.

Remembering that we are dust brings us down to the ground, acknowledges our humanness. Where we can't escape our failings and blindness, our pig headed stubbornness, our greed, our often blinkered outlook, that puts ourselves at the centre of our world. Our propensity to

go our own way, trap ourselves by our own actions, and desires into short term fulfilment. All the things that diminish and bind us and make *us* into non-people.

Perhaps as we journey into Lent we can begin to bring before God the things that we wish to have a conversation about, and allow him to lift into our consciousness the things he wishes to unbind us from. Being faithful to Christ, means finding and being faithful to his image within us. Lent is a journey and a conversation, where we become more aware of Christ's love for us, a love shown most fully on the cross. And in light of that love, where we fall short.

Whether we give something up or take something up is up to us, whatever draws us closer to Christ and allows that conversation to happen. It is likely to happen in peace, in time set aside, when the barriers are down, when we are listening.

Let us be open to the space and conversation Jesus invites us into this Lent. Receive the gift of his forgiveness and have a sense of what 'from now on' means for us.

What happens when *we* are left alone with Jesus and find *ourselves* standing before him?