

Ash Wednesday Homily 2025

Ash Wednesday is the day of penitence and reflection with which we start the 40 day season of fasting penitence discipline and prayer called Lent, it is too though a celebration of love, of love both sacred and sacrificial, so we repent of our sins today (and every day in Lent particularly) symbolised by the ash we wear. And we celebrate today, such love that causes John to say in his gospel “There is no greater love than this: that a person would lay down his life for the sake of his friends.” .

Despite our sinfulness, Jesus spoke almost always, of love. Love for God with all that we are. Love for our neighbours in the same way that we love ourselves. Love for our enemies because they too are made in God’s image. If we ask what God is like the answer is most often, God is love and Jesus’s mission and ministry were a lifelong demonstration of love, forgiveness and compassion in action. He called his disciples, and so us too, to follow him and his example, and He said to them on his way to the cross: ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’

We cannot know what this means unless we have that loving encounter with Jesus ourselves. You know the one - Recognising our own sinfulness, we confess it and then are confronted not with anger or judgement, but with Jesus’s loving acceptance.

Just like the woman taken in adultery and brought to him by the scribes and Pharisees as a test, in the hope that that he would judge and condemn her and even better, condemn himself at the same time.

We know from the beginning that there is no love in the actions of the scribes and Pharisees who bring this woman before Jesus in the middle of the crowd. They declare that she has been “caught in adultery” and should be stoned according to law. Now she has no name, no status and they treat her just as a powerless object to be used in their power play. Now if, in fact, she is guilty of adultery it requires 2 people to commit it and yet only 1 is brought to Jesus. Furthermore, we know the Mosaic law usually said that both those involved were to be stoned. But we also know from historical research that women who were sexually assaulted by a man could be “charged” with adultery. So no matter what actually happened, Jesus knows from the start that this is a sham. No wonder he said so little and instead wrote in the dust

But Jesus is also aware that they are doing this in public and when things are done in public, it is meant to make a point. In this case,

they're trying to do two things. They want to catch Jesus out with witnesses present, but they are also sending a message to the crowd about their power – and it's a message especially to the women. No wonder Jesus does not engage with them directly as we shall see he has another way of making his point.

Then and now, we live still sadly, in a sexist and patriarchal world Jesus was probably well aware of this. If we look at who is speaking in the first part of the gospel, it is all men. The woman is silent. She isn't even given a name and she stands before men who have authority and power – authority even to take her life. Caught up in a power game, she cannot speak and has no one to speak for her. Imposed threatening silence is itself a form of violence, and so all too often women's voices are not heard.

Jesus knows that this woman has been silenced, and used by her accusers, and defuses the situation with his brilliant, mostly non-verbal response. At the same time he also squarely positions himself on her side of things. By publicly defusing their arguments, Jesus casts his lot with this woman.

He turned the situation on its head by recognising both the law and the sin, BUT at the same time by inviting the one without sin to cast the first stone he saved the woman from a cruel death in public. No one, no human person is without sin, they had nothing to say or do in reply, so they all quietly disappeared.

Then Jesus said 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Jesus said something that really only God can say. "I do not condemn you." Instead He forgave her honest confession of her sin. She acknowledged her guilt and he restored her life to her instead condemning her.

He did not minimize her sin. In fact, he said, 'Do not sin again. Because forgiveness is not a license to sin. It is a reason *not* to sin, and instead it is a reason to love and to forgive both ourselves and our neighbours.'

So our Lenten journey is always going to be about the person of Jesus seeing how he shared people's lives, being loving, wise, caring, courageous, vulnerable, forgiving; and so much more. This is what the disciples would have known and shared on that journey to Jerusalem and to the Cross.

But Jesus then added this to all the rest;

No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

In this extraordinary statement he speaks of the love that is sacrificial. Jesus will be taken to the cross and die. Most loving relationships including friendship, family love and romantic passion are usually mutual and involve an exchange of love and affection. But there is more to love than this, a stage a further on, that means sacrificial love, giving completely, unconditionally and totally without calculation. We might think in our own experience of parents, particularly in their children's early years. We might also think of soldiers, airmen and sailors, firemen or police and paramedics and any other people risking everything, serving their community or their county and paying the highest cost.

This kind of love can only be responded to with joy and gratitude.

The key to understanding Jesus's love for us, leading him on the way to Cross, is to see who we are in God's sight. Jesus says: No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. And then he says

You are my friends loved by him beyond imagining
We are his friends called to repent, to be forgiven and to follow in his steps through our yearly keeping company with him in discipline and generosity....remembering as we do we are honoured and blessed because he calls us his friends and...

There is no greater love than this: that a person would lay down his life for the sake of his friends." Amen