

Sermon Lent 5 Year C 2019

I'm sure you've all been involved at one time or another in an argument that never seemed to go anywhere. You might have been at it for hours with no clear victor. Or maybe you have the same fight with the same person whenever you encounter them, and neither of you manage to move past a certain point. And if not you personally, then at least you would have witnessed such things. It might be over politics or religion, those two topics we are warned never to raise in polite society... Or maybe more matters of taste on art and music or what hymns should be sung in church... But the arguments we are most likely to have experienced occur in domestic and family settings; in the complex arena of human and interpersonal relationships. It would be so easy to get on with other people - to not fight and argue - if they were all like me!!

So often in the arguments we find ourselves in, there is *never* a real 'winner'. The same old points of the argument are rehearsed again and again, over and over, each side becoming more firmly entrenched in their particular position. People might give up from exhaustion, or someone might negotiate a treaty by changing the subject. But often it is the loudest voices that dominate, shouting out and over any dissenting opinion.

Rather than shouting louder or giving up in distress or exhaustion, one way forward is to *reframe* the questions we are seeking to address. We need to *shift the way* we look at certain situations or issues we are deadlocked in. To break into a new understanding that *both sides* will appreciate, there often needs to be a paradigm shift. This is not easily done, but it is essential if we are to move beyond the familiar and well worn and entrenched positions people so often find themselves in. When we manage to reframe an argument, it becomes more about shedding light rather than raising the heat.

In the Gospel today we see this reframing of an argument, or rather the *reframing* of a usual and predictable way of responding a tricky issue. Now, the Gospel portion we encounter today comes from John but most scholars agree was not written by the person who wrote the rest of that Gospel. The style and content, the words used, its concerns, are just too different for it to be by the same author and so was added a little later.

But most scholars also agree it does come from a very early and authentic tradition but for some reason never made it into the other Gospels. Some ancient manuscripts, though, do have it Luke, where it is much closer in style. So clearly it was recognised as representing an important and legitimate tradition from Jesus' life; too important to be left out. So, however it got to where it is, it is where it is, and we would be much poorer without it.

Now, as so often happens in the arguments we engage in, we do so to score points and to test and trap others. We see this of course in the way the Scribes and Pharisees handle the issue of the woman caught in adultery. It does seem from the way the story is put to us that the Scribes and Pharisees are being opportunistic; there is a bit of show, a bit of staged drama in luring Jesus to respond. The ruling elite think Jesus is so lax with the law that he will openly dissent from law. In failing to condemn the woman he'll condemn himself.

For the ruling establishment the issue is settled by seeing it as one of judgement and condemnation and as such deserving the highest penalty. As so often occurs in arguments an extreme position is taken. But a person's life hangs in the balance. This is not the kind of stakes we play with when we argue, or tap away furiously on internet forums, and what is most at stake perhaps is bruised egos. No. The gospel here presents us with a life and death situation.

It would seem Jesus is too horrified by the situation he just can't look at the blood-lusting accusers. That may go some way to explaining the curious note of Jesus wring in the dirt, because the law *is* just and adultery *is* terrible. But when he finds a way to cut through the bind he's in, then Jesus *does* look at his accusers. Jesus disarms his opponents - reframes the issue and the heat of the situation is cooled down - by Jesus insisting on the *integrity of the law*. He doesn't ignore the law. In a way he *elevates* its demands. *If there is any one of you who has not sinned...* This is completely unexpected. This is why it has such disarming power. It is phrased in the terms the authorities understood and were themselves issuing judgement - in terms of law and sin - but having it applied to themselves. It couldn't be argued with and they walk away.

But the reframing of the issue is applied not only to the Scribes and Pharisees but also to the woman. The Scribes and Pharisees approached the issue from the position of judgement and condemnation. Jesus here clearly distances himself from that approach. But in addressing the woman he does retain the category of sin: *go sin no more* he says. And in this Jesus also avoids the other extreme response which says her actions don't matter, that they are without consequence, that she can do what she likes. She is a grown woman (and the man involved presumably a grown man), they can do what they like in the privacy of their own homes. That of course is the argument that echoes loud and shrill in our own culture: personal autonomy rules and no one has the right either to condemn let alone act against the behaviour of another. But this of course only ever leads to spirals of self indulgence and ultimately destruction. Jesus seek to *free* the woman from this. So, the reframing of the issue for the woman becomes one of opportunity and conversion. Jesus' refusal to issue judgement is the chance for her to turn her life around.

Jesus manages to completely reframe the usual and predictable responses to this tricky issue in which he is on trial as much as the woman. It is not that Jesus takes a neutral, middle ground. He simply looks at it from a completely different angle, an angle that sheds new light on the situation, and one - and this is important - that brings everyone involved to a new level of understanding. Jesus doesn't shift the focus by compromising the truth, as can so often happen when we need to find a way forward. Instead, he reframes the issue from a position of profound personal, theological and spiritual truth.

As I'm sure you would be aware the church often finds itself embroiled with heated discussions of one sort or another from time to time. In fact, often it seems most of the time! We are called to deal with issues that are complex while headlines remain simplistic. It can be hard to get people to take us seriously especially in a climate when the word 'bigot' is so freely directed against those who express contrary beliefs. We do not live in an age which encourages civil and intelligent discourse. But we should not overlook the important and hard work of finding ways to reframe the questions that do need answers and do need addressing. Christ shows us how it is possible and how in surprising ways, we can all be lead to deeper truth. Amen.