

Lent 5.07

1. Have you noticed how compassionate the Gospels have been today and last Sunday? Today we have this touching story of the woman caught in adultery. She is surrounded by people who don't give a hoot about her and her feelings. They are shaming her, parading her in public, and for their own purposes, namely, to catch this preacher named Jesus in a trap. If he says that the law ordering the stoning of an adulterer should be enforced, then he will lose the sympathy of the crowd, for these evil men presume that the ordinary folk before whom they have paraded this woman will have compassion for her. But if he goes against the law by saying that they should let her go, they can accuse him of being someone who does not obey the law of God. So Jesus loses whatever he does. But he outwits them with his simple sentence: Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone. Even these cruel men don't dare to accept that challenge. They know very well that there are a few skeletons in their closets. So they walk away and leave Jesus alone with this woman. Then he says to her: I don't condemn you. So we see the compassion of Jesus. And last Sunday we had the story of the prodigal son, or, as many like to say today, the prodigal father, because although the son was prodigal, which means extreme or lavish, in his wrongdoing, the father was even

more prodigal in his love for his wayward son. Thus, in this season of Lent which calls us to conversion, the church presents us with its understanding of God as the compassionate and forgiving one. God is prodigal in his love for us. God is like the Father in the parable. God is like Jesus in his dealing with the woman taken in adultery.

2. Forget the past, move on. That is another way of expressing this understanding of a compassionate, forgiving God presented to us in these readings. Both the prodigal son and the adulterous woman must forget their past, and to forget their past means to move away from it, to change their lives, to begin to live in a new and different way. Talk to someone who has been addicted to drugs or alcohol or pornography. They will tell you what it means to forget these things. It means to adopt a new way of living. It means a conversion, a change of mind and heart, a turning around of one's ordinary life. It may even mean a change of friends and location. And all this takes place because God is compassionate and enables these people to turn themselves around, to change their lives, and in that sense to forget and move beyond this bad past to a good future.

3. Many of us may have had less dramatic forgettings, but all of us have things in our past which we want to forget in the sense of moving beyond them. We have been small and prejudiced; we have been unkind and selfish; we have shirked responsibilities. Thus today's message is valid for all us: we must forget these realities and move on. And sometimes this forgetting may involve not an evil but a lesser good. We sense that God is calling us to do more.

4. Our first and second readings speak of this situation. Israel is like us older folks who keep repeating stories about our past and don't seem to be able to take in anything new or current. We are content with the old. Thus Israel kept repeating to itself the events in Egypt and the desert—how God took them out of Egypt and through the desert and into a new land. But now the writer of this 43rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah, writing in the 6th century B.C., when the Jews have lost their independence and many of them are in exile, says to them: “Remember not the events of the past. See, I am doing something new. He is promising them a new exodus, a new land.

5. And then we have this romantic piece of writing from St. Paul who tells the Philippians that he forgot his entire past, his being the

most observant Jew, once he found Christ. He even calls his past rubbish. Listen to him again: But he also knows that this future is not entirely his yet. No, he must stretch towards it as a runner stretches towards the finish line.

6. For the young among us these words should be your program for their future. Stretch out towards a fuller understanding of Christ and what it means to live as his follower. But this is also true for us who are on the last or next to last lap of the race. We can grow. We can move forward. Indeed, we have to do so, because not to move forward is to move backward. For we live in time and cannot be static. Each day brings us new challenges, new opportunities to forget, to move beyond our less than perfect past, to stretch out towards the prize, life in Christ. May Christ give us light so that we can see the new things he is doing in our lives, and strength to embrace them!