

Sunday 11

In commenting on today's readings a Patricia Sanchez gives us a list of people who have done terrible things and yet refused to admit any guilt for their actions. For example, a Jeffrey Dahmer who killed seventeen men after luring them to his apartment in the 1980s pleaded not guilty. The men who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 180 people and injuring more than 680, pleaded not guilty. In 2002 the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, on trial at the Hague, pleaded not guilty even though he had organized the killing of more than 200,000 Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. And just months ago a young man from Nigeria attempted to ignite a bomb aboard a plane headed to Detroit. If he had succeeded, he would have killed more than 300 people. He too pleaded not guilty.

All these people don't think they did anything wrong. They were or are, in their own minds, innocent. They can defend their actions. Yet to most of the world it is only too obvious that they have committed terrible crimes. What is going on here?

The situation is quite different with two people in today's readings. The first person is David, the second the unnamed woman in this

beautiful Gospel story we have just read. David, God's chosen one, had fallen. He had been overcome by his own desire for a woman named Bathsheba whom he had seen bathing while he was strolling on the palace roof. He inquired about her and was told that she was the wife of a soldier named Uriah. Nevertheless, he sent for her and had relations with her and she became pregnant. To disguise his sin, he summoned Uriah from the battle field and told him to go home and visit with his wife. Uriah refused to do so while war was still going on. David summoned him once again, got him drunk and tried once again to get him to go down to his wife, but Uriah wouldn't do so. Then David had him placed in the front line of battle and had the rest of the troops pulled back so that he would be killed. After his death David took Bathsheba into his house. But the prophet Nathan came to David and told him a story about a rich man who had many sheep, but when he had company he took the one little lamb a poor man possessed and had it slaughtered. On hearing about this, David was enraged and said: "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this merits death." Then Nathan said to David: "You are that man!" And David, the adulterer, the murderer, admitted his guilt: "I have sinned against the Lord."

In our Gospel story the woman who washes the feet of Jesus with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and then anoints them with ointment goes nameless, but she is characterized as a “sinful woman.” Apparently the host, Simon the Pharisee, knew about her reputation and is therefore shocked that Jesus is allowing her to touch him. But Jesus sees something different in this woman. He sees that she, like David, has admitted her guilt to herself and has then experienced God’s forgiveness. And Jesus says that her love for God is so great precisely because she has already experienced such great forgiveness from God. Her tears are a sign of her awareness of having been forgiven her sins. She is, Jesus tells Simon, like a man who has been forgiven a great debt and is therefore going to be twice as grateful as a man who has been forgiven a small debt. Simon, on the other hand, is like the man who has been forgiven a small debt. Or, perhaps more accurately, since Simon has not shown Jesus any of the common courtesies of a host, he may not be aware of any need on his part of forgiveness. He is not guilty. He is innocent. He has not experienced any forgiveness. Therefore, he has not experienced any love or gratitude. He and the woman have nothing in common. She is a forgiven and grateful sinner; he is innocence untarnished—or so he thinks!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young Lutheran pastor and theologian in Germany in the 1930s. He was arrested by the Nazis and hanged in prison towards the end of WWII. Bonhoeffer felt that his contemporaries were different from the people of Martin Luther's day who, like Luther himself, were conscious of their sinfulness and sought to find a forgiving God. Today, he argued, people are not seeking a forgiving God. That is not their question. They are simply asking, "Is there is a God?" Thus Bonhoeffer was rejecting the position of those who said that people have to become conscious of their own sinfulness before they can hear the Gospel.

What do you think? Bonhoeffer died fairly young, when he was still in his late thirties or early forties. Would his opinion have changed if he had lived to be sixty or seventy? In other words, do age and experience darken our vision of reality and of our own reality? Are we more likely to see more sin, more darkness, in ourselves as we grow older and reflect on our lives? Did what seemed innocent when we were young now appear as not quite so innocent? Or do we take a slightly different position? Do we realize that it was not all so innocent, but do we recognize at the same time that we were unaware of the dark side at that time and that we now look upon our actions then as so much foolishness rather than real sinfulness? And we presume that God looks at us

in the same way, that He is sorry but also forgiving of our youthful foolishness?

Bonhoeffer was confronted by a dreadful reality, that of Nazism. Indeed, he gave his life to fight it. Would he then not have said that for a Nazi it would be necessary first to recognize his own sinfulness before he could hear the Gospel? And for ourselves? This much we can say. We want to stand with the woman in this Gospel story, and not with Jesus' host, the Pharisee Simon. We want to feel what she felt, grateful tears to God who forgives us our childishness, our sinfulness, provided that we, like her and like the sinful David, admit that we are not total innocents.