

Sunday 20 September, 2020.

Milford Baptist

Jesus' character revealed

John 8:1-11

As I have indicated,

I want us to concentrate on Jesus,
his character, his wisdom and his purpose.

So this morning we look at Jesus as his character is revealed
in this story of the woman caught in adultery from John 8.

I hope you have read the story in the order of service.

We need to note before I begin the message
that it is generally accepted that this story
was not written by John.

Some versions of the bible omit it, or put it in a separate section.

However, it is also generally accepted that it is an accurate narrative.

Leon Morris, a respected biblical scholar writes:

“But if we cannot feel that this is part of John’s gospel
we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus...
whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic.
It rings true.”

This morning, I am going to tell the story twice more.

First of all, from the perspective of the Pharisees and scribes.

After we have heard and considered this version,

I will retell the story from the perspective
of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

So hear the perspective of the Pharisees and scribes.

At last we had him where we wanted him.
This Jesus fellow was causing us considerable grief.
People liked what they saw
they liked what they heard.
What was worse
– it caused them to ‘not like’ what we said.

Somehow we had to get the focus off him
– off who he was
- off what he taught.

And now we had come up with the ‘how’.
How we could make him look bad.
How we could get rid of his credibility.

It was a clever plan.

Put him in a position where whatever he said would be wrong.
Where he had two options and whichever he chose
Would get him in trouble.

You see – we were not Pharisees and scribes without good reason.
We knew the scriptures,
and we knew how we could use the scriptures
to put this Jesus into an impossible situation.

It took clever planning.
We had to manipulate a situation,
set a trap,
initiate a plan where we could find a couple
in a compromising situation.

And then we could haul the woman before Jesus
and ask him what we should do to punish her.
That was the question to which there was no right answer

So – as planned it all happened.

The man – well, we let him get away –

The woman, we hauled to the temple courts
where these gullible crowds were following Jesus' every word.
This would show them.

Teacher, we said – I hope you heard the irony in that -
Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery.
The law of Moses says we should stone such women.
What do you say?

We had him.
You see, if he answered 'stone her'
He would be encouraging an action contrary to Roman law.

If he answered 'don't stone her'
he would be going against Jewish law.

And among all those people listening to all this
there would be those who favoured leniency,
and those who were legalists.
There was no way he could please them all.
Yes – we had him where he was going to look bad to some, at least.

But this Jesus, unfortunately for us,
Was not an easy walk-over.

Rather, he leant over,
and wrote with his finger in the dust of the ground.
Didn't say anything.

He wasn't going to get away that easily.
We put the pressure on some more.
"Come on – give us an answer."
Stone her or let her off?

Then he did speak, and we wished he hadn't.

If anyone of you is without sin – let him throw the first stone.

Instead of us having him in an impossible dilemma,
He had us in an impossible dilemma.

Our plan had been too clever.
We had let the man we had caught escape.
That was part of our deal with him.

We didn't count on this Jesus knowing
that we had ourselves broken the law
which required both of the parties caught to face trial.

What Jesus was really saying was this:
“None of you is in a position to stone this woman,
for you have disregarded the very law
you profess to honour. It is a travesty.”

It was the older, wiser of us,
who realised first that it was us who were trapped, not Jesus.
And they quietly left, and the rest of us followed.

This Jesus was wiser, cleverer, smarter than we had realised.
And we were the ones left looking just a little stupid.

Yes - we see the trappers became the trapped.

In this version of the story,
we see the wisdom, the authority, the integrity,
and the morality of Jesus,
standing so obviously up against
what was the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes.

Yes - we see that there is no-one who is totally righteous,
especially those who think they are!

Malcolm Muggeridge, in his wisdom, wrote this:

It is precisely when you consider the best in man
that you see there is in each of us
a hard core of pride or self-centeredness
which corrupts our best achievements
and blights our best experiences.

It comes out in all sorts of ways—
in the jealousy which spoils our friendships,
in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good,
in the easy conversion of love into lust,
in the meanness which makes us depreciate
the efforts of other people,
in the distortion of our own judgment by our own self-interest,
in our fondness for flattery and our resentment of blame,
in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals
which we never begin to practice.

So, given the challenge for those without sin to cast the first stone,
We, too, would have to quietly sneak away.

Now – let's hear the story as told by the woman.

It was a real nightmare
When I share it with you
any nightmare you have experienced
Would be just a dream.

It was an embarrassment beyond imagining.
When I share it with you
any embarrassment you have experienced
would be mild in comparison.

It was so fearful.
When I share it with you
Any danger you have experienced
Would be tame in comparison.

It started with my being seduced by a man.
That's the polite way of putting it!
In my culture it was not acceptable to say 'no'.

But this was not just a private seduction.
It was him setting up a performance.
A performance that would see me being seized
by the audience – the audience that he knew would be there.

And this audience was no unnamed, unimportant rabble
It was the Pharisees and scribes
The leaders of our people.

Now can you begin to understand my embarrassment?

Caught in the act of adultery.
And not only seized but pushed and pulled
To the courts of the Temple
Where a large number of people
were listening to a Rabi called Jesus.

There I was put on display in front of all the crowd.
Standing alone in my shame and humiliation.
Now can you begin to understand my nightmare?

Then they pressured the teacher.
Reminded him that I deserved to be stoned to death.
What did he say about that?
I knew what the law said – it agreed with them.
Now can you begin to understand my fear?

I had my head bowed
What would he say?
Would his words determine my future?
Seal my death?

I couldn't hear any comment from the teacher.

The leaders kept on at him to make his decision.
But he remained silent for some time.

When I glanced up he was bending down writing in the sand.
Then he said the most unexpected thing.

He actually agreed that I should be stoned,
but added the most incredible condition.

Let the person who had never sinned throw the first stone.

I waited for that first stone to hit.
But there was a silence you could cut with a knife.

And when I diffidently looked up
The leaders had all gone.
Amazingly, I was alone with Jesus in the middle of the crowd.

Then he looked me in the eye
And asked where my accusers were.
Had no one condemned me?

I quietly replied: No Lord.
Again he met my gaze – eye to eye – and said:
Neither do I - go and sin no more.

There was something very special about his eyes
- The way he looked at me –
It was as though he didn't see me as I was,
but as I was meant to be.

I guess what I heard was something like:
“You have committed adultery.
But there is more to your life than your sin.
You can be much more than you have been.
You can turn from this sin once and for all.
You can have a new life.”

And you know what?
My nightmare had become a dream.

A dream of a new beginning,
A dream of a forgiven past,
A dream of a changed life.
And Jesus was responsible for all of this.

His words brought forgiveness and release from my shame.
I sensed that he was the only one who was without sin,
but he forgave me, and gave me new hope.

He definitely gave me freedom from the fear that had consumed me.
Instead of shame, fear and despair,
He gave me forgiveness, peace and hope.
This day that began with a nightmare
Ended with this new dream of a changed and meaningful future.

What do we understand about Jesus' character
in this telling of the story?

What amazing understanding!
What incredible compassion!
What astounding love!

What is the best known bible verse related to God's love?
We know don't we.
It is John 3:16 and we probably know it by heart:
"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . ."

And it is a great verse.
But John 3:17 is just as important:
"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it,
but to save the world through him."

There are some Christians who talk and behave as though
the chief reason Christ came was to condemn people.

And if Christ won't condemn certain people,
then these Christians certainly will.
They have their list of those who don't quite measure up.

You know what is sad?
Many non-Christians think that these people speak for Christ.
They do not.
Christ even forgave those who crucified him.

There is a humorous story about a community
that held an Easter pageant.
Different people in the community played the various characters.
Jesus' character was played by a big, burly oil-field worker,
primarily because he was the only one strong enough
to carry the heavy wooden beam that was to be Jesus' cross.

As they came to the part in which Jesus
was being led away to be crucified,
a little man who was simply part of the jeering crowd
got caught up in the emotion of the moment.
He joined in the shouts of "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

As the man playing Jesus was being led away,
carrying the cross upon his back,
he had to walk right in front of this little man
who was still shouting at the top of his lungs.

In fact, he got so carried away that he actually spat on Jesus.
Suddenly everything came to a shocked standstill.
The big, burly oil-field worker stopped,
wiped his face dry, looked at the little man,
and uttered the most memorable line in the entire play:
"I'll be back to take care of you after the Resurrection!"

Well, that is a very human response to being spit upon,
but it was not Jesus' response.

He forgave his enemies,
those who cursed him, spit upon him,
drove nails through his hands.
Even them – he sought to love, and not to condemn.

Someone has written:
“We blaspheme Christ when we condemn others in Christ’s name.
He did not come to condemn. He came to save.
He is the Saviour of the world.”

Jesus treated this woman with dignity, compassion and love.

But he was also honest about her sin.
He didn’t pretend it didn’t matter.
He didn’t tell her it wasn’t important.

The wonderful thing about the grace of Jesus,
Is that it isn’t just about forgiving the past
It is about strength for today,
And hope for tomorrow.

Remember when we use the common benediction
which begins with the words:
“And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”
It is about His grace being with us,
To strengthen and enable us to live.

So the grace we receive from Jesus that forgives our sin
when we don’t deserve forgiveness,
the grace that changes our past
also changes our future.

I am totally sure that the forgiveness, grace and compassion of Jesus
Meant that woman was not only ‘not the same’,
She was totally different.
- renewed, restored, reformed.

Jesus looks at you and me this morning.

He sees us as we are, with our weakness and sin,
But he also sees us as he intends us to be,
With our possibilities, our gifts and our strengths.

He speaks to you and to me,
And they are not words of criticism,
They are not words of disapproval,
They are not words of rebuke,
They are not words of condemnation.

Rather they are words of forgiveness,
words of love,
words of grace,
words of hope.

He says to us.
“Don’t live under the condemnation of others,
Live in my grace and hope and strength.”

“I don’t condemn you”, he reminds us,
“so go and, in my grace and strength,
give up your sinful ways,
and live a renewed, compassionate and servant-hearted life.”