

Christ Church, Bath

Ash Wednesday

14 February 2024

7.30pm

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51.1-18

2 Corinthians 5.20b – 6.10

St John 8.1-11

Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

The scribes and Pharisees would, wouldn't they? If a woman caught in adultery was brought before them you'd expect them to condemn her. It's who they were – the guardians of the law, sworn to uphold and enforce it. Just like our judges and police. Just what all law abiding citizens should do.

We're the products of our upbringings, our environments, of the influences that surrounded us when we were being formed and informed. Insofar as those influences were other people, weren't they similarly formed by their own pasts? And doesn't everyone also have bad experiences, all of them leaving their scars? A bereavement, neglect, maybe bullying, sometimes extreme violence? What did these all do to us?

On the other side of the balance sheet there are the epiphanies. We all have them, at least I hope we do. It might be the inspirational teacher, or a challenging work of art. You could have been introduced to a totally different experience when you were at college, one which opened a new perspective on the world and changed your politics, your life's course. Or one which confirmed your prejudices.

Lent is the somewhat artificial time in the church's year when we try to engineer the possibilities for such epiphanies. It's when we are encouraged to read a Lent book, attend a study course or discussion group, cut some of the clutter out of our lives to help us get rid of the chaff,

undertake a devotional exercise. Here at Christ Church we have our Thursday Pilgrim Group. We are commending this year's Lent book. And of course Jesus chose to observe his own Lent, his forty days fast in the wilderness.

We've just recited Psalm 51. At one level it's obvious why it's chosen for Ash Wednesday. Tonight we can identify with the psalmist. But why did he write it, why did the temple authorities have it in the temple? In popular imagination church, temple – they're no place for sinners, people like the woman brought before Jesus (unless it's for their condemnation of course).

One question this incident raises for me is this? The scribes and the Pharisees will have known this psalm, this bit of liturgy. Did they allow it to work on them, like I pray it works on us? Or had it become so routine that they no longer thought about it? My question is this, why were people familiar with this psalm so quick to condemn? I guess it was why we all do. For who of us hasn't cast a stone?

It would be nice to think that when they walked away, their eyes were beginning to open. Any

thing else? Perhaps there was. Jerusalem was a small place. It's quite likely that someone in the government, like Joseph of Arimathaea, or perhaps Nicodemus, heard about it. What did they think about it? For if this episode did take place in what we call Holy Week (when else was Jesus in Jerusalem?), on the following Friday after Joseph and Nicodemus had cast their votes condemning Jesus, it seems they could have been having reservations. Feeling uneasy, guilty even, wanting to make some sort of amends.

We'll never exactly know why they went to Pilate and saw to Jesus' burial. The secrets of others' hearts are for them, and for God. Anyway, that's not the point. The point is us. Our response. And tonight, it's whether we'll be using the coming forty days to allow windows to open into our souls, to be attentive to new epiphanies, new influences, new insights, and then be moved to do something about them.