

Throwing Stones

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of January 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Throwing Stones and is from John chapter 8 verses 1 to 11. Mighty God, we pray that your word will be written in our heart by your spirit so that we may not only understand it but do it.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. You may like to have opened the passage from John's Gospel chapter 8, beginning at verse 1, page 870 in the Pew Bibles.

And we're preaching through John's Gospel in the sermons leading up to Easter in the morning and the evening here. No doubt you've heard that General Waranto and the Indonesian army is at least under threat of being investigated for war crimes in East Timor.

There's a question of course about whether they'll ever be brought to justice and whether justice will be done, whether they'll receive a fair trial. But I'm sure most if not all of us would like to see those who perpetrated such bloody hostility in East Timor in September brought to fair trial.

[1 : 33] Others of us would also perhaps like to see General Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator brought to trial.

It seems that his bloody regime was responsible for the deaths of thousands and thousands of Chileans in the 1970s. And yet perhaps he will end up dying without facing trial.

Maybe on a smaller note and closer to home, but nonetheless an issue of justice, was it fair that Bruce Mansfield was sacked by 3AW for taking kickbacks for various products that he advertised on the radio?

Was it fair that the former test umpire Steve Randell got only a four-year sentence for child abuse? Without fail, every single day on our radios or television news or in the newspapers, there is some issue of justice.

Whether somebody gets off or is treated too severely or unfairly, issues of justice are in the news every day. And the church is not immune from that either.

[2 : 50] Just in recent months, the Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn admitted a charge of adultery from something over 15 years ago when he was a parish minister in another place in Australia.

And he offered his resignation and then in December, he was reinstated as the Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn. That's a case that's received much media attention outside the church.

Some would say that he was treated too harshly. That the crime or mistake that he'd made had been so long ago that really we were treating him too harshly.

Others that he was treated too leniently. That he ought not be the Bishop any longer. Others would say that because he's a Bishop, double standards have been applied to him.

At one end of the spectrum, some would say that the church must be holy and therefore he should not continue because of his mistake. Others that the church should be forgiving and that he should be able to continue in his office.

[4 : 00] Very often those outside the church accuse the church and Christians of being hypocrites, of preaching about forgiveness and love and yet practicing the opposite.

On the spectrum of mercy to holiness, where should we stand and how should we act? It's an issue of justice but it's complicated for Christians because of the command to be forgiving and merciful and loving.

And this is not a new phenomenon. It's not something that has only just happened in recent years. Justice has been a thorny issue from the beginning of time.

And in the passage before us, Jesus faces the same dilemma. There are those who are seeking to attempt to impale Jesus on the horns of the dilemma of justice compared to mercy.

Each of them went home from the temple while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives where he traditionally stayed when he was in Jerusalem.

[5 : 12] Early in the morning, he came again to the temple. It was just after the Feast of Tabernacles. There were big crowds there. All the people came to him and he sat down as any rabbi would.

It was the traditional posture for teaching in those days unlike standing in a pulpit. And he began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees.

The scribes were the experts in the law of Moses. The Pharisees were the predominant or prevailing Jewish party in the first century of Jesus' time.

They brought to him a woman who had been caught in adultery. And making her stand before all of them, they said to him, Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? This is not an innocent question to Jesus.

[6 : 14] These are not people perplexed by the law coming to him as the expert to solve a difficult case. This whole episode reeks of rotten fish.

Where's the man? If you catch a woman in adultery, in the very act of adultery, there must be a man. She can't commit adultery by herself.

Where is she? It takes two to tango in such things. And we're told that she was caught in the very act. And after all, she had to be if there was to be a charge brought against her.

Compromising places, seeing two people in the same room or even in a state of undress was not evidence enough to lay the charge of adultery. But she'd been caught in the very act.

But where's the man? And where's the shame about this incident? Here are the Jewish leaders, the scribes, the Pharisees, dragging along a woman in tow.

[7 : 19] It seems publicly humiliating her, almost boasting about what she's done. They don't seem to be saddened by the event. Where's the shame? They almost seem to gloat about the fact that they caught her in the act.

Is it perhaps a setup? Has she been framed by them? Is it an exercise in sordid surveillance, a primitive form of big brother, the moral vigilantes at work?

But not only that, where's the fair trial? There is little indication in these Jewish leaders bringing this woman to Jesus that they are actually concerned for a fair trial.

There are no judges. There are no legal experts with them. There is no opportunity for this woman to give her defense. And even if it is obvious that she's guilty, she still has the right of defense.

After all, in the very end of the preceding chapter, Nicodemus acknowledges the Jewish position when he says to Jesus in verse 51, our Lord has not judged people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they're doing.

[8 : 33] But that doesn't seem to be the case here. Rather, she's just publicly humiliated in the busy courts of the temple. The other question about this incident is, where's the problem?

This is a straightforward case. She was caught in the very act of adultery and the law was very clear about adultery. It warranted death.

This is not a grey area of the law. The law of Moses in the books of Leviticus and Exodus and Deuteronomy in this case were very clear. Why do they need to go to Jesus?

They ought to be able to solve this problem very simply for themselves. This is not the sort of case that you would apply to the upper court, the Supreme Court, or the Privy Council, or its Jewish equivalent, to make a ruling on some grey and difficult area of dispute.

This is straightforward. The Old Testament law was very clear. A woman such as this caught in adultery deserved death. Traditionally stoning, but that's not specifically in the law in this case.

[9 : 47] So why do they come to Jesus at all? Well, we smell a rat. John tells us that. They said this to test him.

Verse 6. So that they might have some charge to bring against him. They're trying to trap him.

That's what it's about. They're not just even innocently finding out Jesus' opinion.

They're trying to trap him. If Jesus agrees with them that this woman deserves death, then he runs the risk of running into trouble with the Roman authorities.

The reason being that in Jesus' day, Rome governed Judea. Jews were not allowed to put people to death even if they'd been proven to be guilty of some of the crimes of the Old Testament that warranted death.

Idolatry, adultery, murder, breaking the Sabbath, taking the Lord's name in vain. All of them had a sentence of death but in Jesus' day, the Jews could not execute such a sentence.

[10:52] Only the Romans had the right for capital punishment. So if Jesus agrees with them here, we could suspect that these Jewish authorities would go to the Roman authorities and say, here is somebody saying that they should be executing somebody without your approval.

But on the other hand, if Jesus disagrees with them, then he would be seen as being very liberal with the law. Almost tossing out the venerated law of Moses.

So what's Jesus going to do? In the preceding chapter, he had accused the Jews of not knowing and keeping the law of Moses. The very thing they're trying to trap him into doing here.

So back in chapter 7, verse 19, Jesus accused them saying, did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?

And then a bit later on in verse 24, he said to them, do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgment. Now they're out to get him.

[11:59] Their motives are not fair. They're not honorable. They're seeking an unfair trial, not so much of the woman as of Jesus. Jesus doesn't answer them.

He bends down and writes in the dirt. The only thing we're ever told that Jesus wrote in his life was written not on paper but on dirt and it's lost forever. We don't know what he wrote.

Of course it doesn't matter because if it did, we'd be told. There are lots of people who idly speculate that he wrote down what he was about to say. Maybe that he wrote down various laws from the Old Testament about fair trials or about what happens to somebody committing adultery.

He could just have been doodling. We're not told. It doesn't matter. But while he's writing, his Jewish accusers keep pressing the question against him.

Come on, what do you say? Don't ignore us. You can imagine them getting a bit anxious or angry at him for ignoring to answer their question as he kept on doodling in the dirt.

[13:12] They thought they'd got him stumped. They thought that he was speechless because he was stuck. At last he speaks in words that are now well famous.

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. In the Old Testament law, if a case was proven and somebody proven guilty and the sentence was death by stoning, the first stone was to be thrown by an eyewitness.

It was, after all, a fair enough rule that if somebody brought a charge and said, I saw this person doing this, then they would have to testify. And if the case was proven, then that eyewitness had to, in effect, back up his or her words by throwing the first stone.

Jesus returned to doodling having said such a statement. And one by one, beginning with the elders, they left.

We can envisage a procession of people, the crowd, gradually one by one dispersing, walking away from him and from the woman. They came to shame the woman and to shame Jesus, but these rats left with a tail between their legs, leaving in shame.

[14:39] Jesus' reply to them has left open the possibility of capital punishment in this case. It's possible that the woman deserved death.

Well, she did, according to Old Testament law. But Jesus' reply places restrictions on those who could execute such a sentence. Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. And none of her accusers qualified. All left. Jesus' reply has exposed their hypocrisy and their double standards.

They'd taken the high moral ground but illegitimately. And now that's been exposed for all to see. Jesus is not saying that only perfect people can judge.

But rather that judgment, justice, punishment must be executed fairly with compassion, not humiliation, with honesty and not prejudice, with humility and not moral arrogance.

[15:49] Must be exercised by people with honourable intent. and none of that applied in this case. Jesus' words, not only to them, stand true for all.

None of us, even Christians, can afford to climb to the high country of moral ground. It is always easier to throw stones from the top of a hill, to take the moral high ground and rain down rocks on those we think are beneath us morally.

But even Christians rarely belong in such elevated territory. Philip Yancey, in his best-selling book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, tells the story of a man whom he knew when he was young, who'd befriended him and helped him along in the Christian life.

This man took a very strict moral view. He was quite indeed a moral crusader in the United States and then after some time left to South Africa because he was upset by the diminishing moral standards of the United States.

And though he kept in touch for 25 years, Philip Yancey had not seen him in all that time. On a trip to South Africa, he'd arranged to meet up with him.

[17:18] At the airport, I think in Johannesburg, he was met by his wife. He was wondering where his friend was after some time he discovered.

His friend was in prison on pornography charges. He'd claimed high moral ground but illegitimately it had come unstuck.

he'd ended up doing the very things or even worse that he was accusing others of doing. He's not a unique example. There are many and in some sense we are all vulnerable to falling into the same trap of thinking that we're on the high moral ground when in fact we're not.

for without exception we fail the moral pinnacle. We fail perfection. Our sins may be different from this woman, from her accusers, from that man in South Africa but sinners we are and as Christians we acknowledge that before God.

But on the other hand we must never pretend to be inhabitants of the lofty moral heights. Such self-righteousness ill befits Christian people.

[18:42] For like this woman the sentence to any sinner by God is in the end death. Not necessarily of course death by stoning but death being cut off from God forever.

Sin's wages sin's dues sin's desserts are death. And that sentence hangs around the neck of us all. The woman is left abandoned by her accusers. Jesus had kept on doodling. Maybe innocently he hasn't noticed the people have gone.

Maybe he has because the questioning must have stopped. Jesus straightened up and said to her woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?

She said no one sir. Like her accusers and like us she was a sinner and the ultimate sentence that she deserved was death for her sin.

[19:57] She deserved God's punishment and his justice. But to her Jesus said neither do I condemn you. The only one worthy of throwing a stone declined even to pick one up.

Condemnation was her due. She was after all an adulteress. But as Jesus had said earlier in John's Gospel in chapter three he came not to condemn but to save.

life. And he offers her mercy. He allows her to live rather than face a rightful death. They were not an easy word for Jesus to say.

It doesn't come lightly to him to say to an adulteress neither do I condemn you. but Jesus himself had paid the price to enable him to say such words.

A heavy price for death was the sentence that was due. A heavy price because Jesus paid it in his own death on the cross. In order to say to her neither do I condemn you.

[21:10] In order for Jesus to say I came to this world not to condemn but to save. Jesus went to death himself on the cross so that he could save.

So that he could say neither do I condemn you. His death on the cross was the price that he paid so that this woman could walk away not condemned.

It's why Jesus came to this world not just for this woman not just for those who lived in his time but for us too so that we can walk away without condemnation allowed to live despite our sins meaning we deserve death.

Here is a shameful adulteress who is offered a free gift the gift of life. She's offered mercy. Her sentence of death is removed by Jesus' word.

At a high price that she did not have to pay. The Bible's word for that is grace. The free undeserved gift of God's mercy paid for by Jesus' death on the cross.

[22:34] I hate paying more for things than I need to pay. And when I buy petrol at 79 cents at one station and then turn the corner and find it at 75 cents, I'm annoyed.

I'm annoyed with myself. Admittedly, I don't want to spend all day driving around trying to find the cheapest petrol. But on the other hand, I kick myself for thinking, oh, I've just gone and wasted about \$1.32 or something like that.

When I was in Israel and Egypt, it's quite fun to go shopping, but it's also stressful because you know that everybody's trying to rip you off. nothing is ever labelled with a price. If you ask how much it is, they'll tell you 20 times the price that it should be paid.

And then you have to go through this rigmarole of haggling. In the end, you might buy something only to find that somebody else in the tour party has just bought it for a quarter of the price that you've just paid.

I hate being ripped off. And I'm sure God's the same. I'm sure that if God had found a cheaper way to pay for our salvation, he would have done so. He had all eternity after all to shop around for the bargain.

[23 : 44] How could he save the world cheaply? The cheapest price God could pay to save us from death forever, to save us from condemnation, was the high price of his son's death on the cross.

If God could have done it cheaper or any other way, he would have done so. But he paid the price, the high price of Jesus' death, so that we like that woman could be told, neither do I condemn you. But grace, though free for us because God's paid for it, does not come cheaply. Jesus completes his words to the woman by saying, go your way.

And from now on, do not sin again. You see, God's mercy and grace is meant to lead us to repentance.

I'm not sure that this woman was actually forgiven, but she was certainly offered God's mercy at this point. But the reason God extends mercy and grace to any of us is to lead us to repentance, which leads to holiness of living.

[25 : 00] That's what Paul said in Romans 2, as we heard in the first Bible reading today. You see, the recipients of grace are not to wallow around in laxity and complacency because God's paid the price for our salvation.

But rather, grace's recipients stand under obligation to live holy and pure lives, to change, to repent, to turn away from our sin and live the lives that match up to God's moral standards.

That's grace's aim. That's why Jesus died. Not just to extend forgiveness to us, but rather so that we will be pure and holy. And anything less from us to God rips God off.

He's bought a dud. If we do not respond to grace with repentance and obedience. repentance. Jesus holds it together here.

Free grace, but not cheap grace. Free grace that carries the demand of repentance. Go away. And from now on, do not sin again.

[26 : 13] Of all people in society, Christians are the ones who face the dilemma of justice and mercy the most.

For above all others, we are taught by God to be forgiving people, merciful and compassionate. But above all others, we are taught by God to be holy, pure, perfect, blameless and spotless.

How can we be both? How can we love sinners without condoning their sin? How can mercy and purity meet in our words and our actions?

I'm sure for many of us, we've been confronted by the sins of our friends or our family or even ourselves and been torn in the dilemma of, do I respond with forgiveness, but I don't want to condone what's being done.

Do I respond with perfection and moral purity? But I want to extend compassion and mercy. That dilemma is irreconcilable save for one thing.

[27 : 20] Jesus died on the cross. Their mercy and holiness meet. Their grace and purity embrace.

There is the glorious gospel expressed in its full. gospel. Jesus extending to the world free grace by taking the heavy price of death on himself.

This woman was confronted by that same glorious gospel. Whether she turned from her sin or not, we do not know. But Jesus' words summarize the gospel succinctly and truthfully.

Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again. And Jesus had paid the price that enabled him to say those words when perhaps about a year later he died on the cross for us all.

Amen.