

Fifth Sunday of Lent Year C

April 2-3, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 43: 16-21; Philippians 3: 8-14; John 8:1-11

Though one of the most cherished in the bible, today's gospel remains shrouded in mystery, beginning with the fact that the central figure is never named. This led to all sorts of speculation as to the woman's identity. But herein lies its strength. Her identity is far less important than the brilliant combination of mercy and strength that Jesus exhibits.

He shows mercy towards the woman caught in sin, while challenging all involved. Jesus exhorts her to avoid the sin in the future– he calls a sin a sin. And by a direct challenge towards those who judge, one by one, he disperses the angry mob. This is why the account has provided such rich material upon which to reflect. In his cryptic writing in the sand, it is as if Jesus had placed a mirror in front of the eyes of the scribes, the so-called experts in the Scriptures. Those who accuse suddenly become the accused.

The experts are trying to catch Jesus by means of the Mosaic Law. Rather than fall for it, he turns the tables and shines the light right back at their own hypocrisy. You cannot hide behind the law to condemn others when you yourselves are guilty of your own sin. It is legalism at its worst.

I recall vividly my own example of legalism– February 24, 1982, my first Ash Wednesday after having turned 18– thus, my first experience of fasting, in addition to abstinence. I hatched a plan! As soon as the clock struck midnight, it would be February 25–all bets were off! The Milky Way Bar and glass of cold milk were strategically positioned, ready to go.

Such was my legalism forty years ago. To finish the story, I unwrapped the candy bar, but by God's grace at the last second, put it away, knowing that this kind of legalism kills the spirit. Now, forty years later, the importance of this and other practices in our journey of Lent is surely in my sights. They matter. The period following the Fifth Sunday of Lent is called Passiontide. We are invited to enter more deeply into the Passion of Jesus.

The remembrance of *Laetare Sunday*, just one week ago, seems distant, as all around us we see visual reminders of the impending Passion. A 1988 letter from the Congregation for Worship wrote that the practice of veiling crucifixes and images in churches may be observed.¹ (We couldn't cover the statues here without first emptying all the fabric stores!) I was a seminarian then and recall the fierce debates- it had fallen out of vogue.

Thankfully, it's made a comeback. It stems from the Gospel of John 8:46-59, at the end of which the Jews took up stones to cast at Jesus, who hid himself away. The veiling symbolizes that Christ's Divinity was hidden at the time of His Passion and death, the very essence of Passiontide.²

The daily Gospel readings in this fifth week are all taken from John and evoke the increasing tension between Jesus and the authorities that eventually lead up to Good Friday. The severity of our Lenten fast is increased during its last days. It can serve a valuable purpose, not only in your own life, but for our Church.

Depending upon your age, health and other factors, this fasting could take other forms too. Only you know your situation to know what would work best. Do something that intensifies your Lenten observance as we approach Holy Week. You might consider skipping all in-between meal eating, taking smaller portions, and longing instead more intensely for the spiritual food that lasts forever.

In denying our senses of these legitimate pleasures, we dispose ourselves to long for what is truly lasting. We also conform ourselves more closely to the Cross of Christ. We give witness that we are willing to bear our share of the burden of the Cross, even if it is a mere sliver of the Cross in comparison. Offer up sacrifice for the people of Ukraine or for a loved one. Straining forward to what lies ahead, we continue our journey towards Calvary, walking humbly with our Lord.

¹ Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts, 20 February 1988.

² See Rev. Peter Elliott's "Celebrations of the Liturgical Year" (Ignatius Press, 2002)