

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

All Is Known! Fly At Once!

We're all public sinners these days. Very little seems to be hidden from view in our society, and there seems to be a general fashion for "coming clean", if "clean" is an adjective that can be applied to the life in question. That doesn't seem to matter either, as things once seen as shameful are now accepted as ordinary facts of life. During my recent illness I was bored enough to watch *Hollyoaks*, a programme screened well before the 9pm "watershed", where every known form of promiscuity and perversion is gone through as an everyday reality in a series of young lives: it's remarkable that there are practically no characters in the story older than about 30, and there seems little moral response to what goes on, except what is immediately recognisable as homophobia or prejudice. Watching this stuff must be pretty erosive of moral sense in the thinking of any young person, as he or she weighs up what's acceptable or unacceptable in the life that is just opening.

The Adulteress

The woman in today's Gospel who is hauled before the court as an adulteress is in grave danger. According to Jewish law she can be stoned to death. We are revolted by this in the Bible, as we are when we see it enacted in Sharia law today; but this should halt us in our tracks, as we recall that our attitude to promiscuity in our own day may say more about our indifference to morality itself, than about our humanity and high-mindedness. Our world agrees with no form of moral standard, if it implies one person disapproving of another's conduct. We've been fed with the notion that every form of behaviour is just as acceptable as every other, just a matter of personal taste; and this has acclimatised us to accepting evil. It's something we aren't allowed to take exception to. How many families have to live with the effects of bad ideas and evil deeds, in the name of each person's freedom to do as he likes? Is this unconnected with the danger of walking down our streets, or the crime that is committed in our homes? I think not.

Punishment

People rightly ask what became of the *man* who was "taken in adultery" at the same time as our girl. But that's not all. There is an immediate feeling that punishment is out of

place here. The damage that is done by adultery may be hard to locate or quantify. Those who commit the sin harm themselves, allowing their lust to triumph over their moral dignity. Others too are being harmed: certainly one spouse is being betrayed: maybe two. Then, the mortar of promise and trust from which our community is built is being weakened; every broken vow weakens our power to be faithful. Having become public, the damage is diffused to all who hear of it. This is real scandal, genuine harm. Is punishment inappropriate?

What Jesus Says

The Lord does something unique here, and mysterious too: he writes some words in the sand. He left us no scriptures of his own, so this is the only place where he writes, and we haven't the least notion of what he wrote. Then he looks up, and speaks those famous words, *Let the one who has no sin cast the first stone*. This, and the silence that follows it, dissolves the crisis. Jesus has called the whole gathering to holiness, and they have all acknowledged that they fall short of it. With deep symbolism, the woman is left alone at last, with *the one who has no sin*. Their brief exchange of words is eloquent. *Has no one condemned you? - No-one, sir. - Neither do I. Go and sin no more*. Notice the royal authority Jesus assumes over her sin. It is not as a fellow human that he says these words: his refusal to condemn is not to be read alongside theirs. It is an act of God.

Refusing To Condemn

Sins can be condemned, but not sinners; and the place for sins to be condemned is *before they happen!* We have the power to refuse to sin, and when we exercise it we condemn sin to death in the proper way. But to do this we must have a live sense of right and wrong; and that is not drawn from personal taste or ethical philosophy. It is to be drawn from the privilege we have of living our lives in God's presence. What we could not do in God's presence, we must not do when we feel we are hidden from his gaze. What is distressing about the soft porn in *Hollyoaks* and the like is that it implies a world where God is not present. That fictional world is dangerous to us, because it is the world where we can commit every kind of *real* damage. Let us live in the light of God.

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