

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The First Stone

No-one who studies the Fourth Gospel for any length of time could be in any doubt that today's extract - the story of the woman taken in adultery - is not one with that tremendous document. It floats in the midst of the great arguments between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, and it does not share the same language or vocabulary as the chapters around it. Most scholars incline to the belief that it belongs to the tradition of Luke - the Gentile, whose view of Jesus is always against the backcloth of the Roman world, not the narrower Jewish one where his life unfolded. Here is a Christian compassion that is wider than the Jewish regard for the Law and its sanctions; Luke's teacher, Paul, kicked against the nationalism and sectarianism of first-century Judaism, and here Luke shows Jesus teaching on the same divine level.

The Perfection of Christ

The power of Jesus is to do with his human embodying of divine perfection. In the Old Testament it was largely assumed that divinity and humanity were impossible to mix. The holiness of God can only be approached under the most stringent safety-regulations: in the liturgy, with all who participate in it duly purified and ritually qualified, or in specific moments of divine grace, where a child of the earth has found favour with God. Even then, the encounter is one surrounded by dread, in which it is clearly understood that only the sovereign mercy of God prevents human nature from destruction: *who can see God, and live?* In Jesus, however, something awesome happens. Little by little those who meet him learn to obey him, to remain in him, to make their home in him. Further and further he leads them, demanding their sustained trust and commitment. He assumes ever greater importance for them, they become more and more absorbed in his words and his invitation to them. Imperceptibly his influence over them begins to coincide with that authority which has only previously belonged to God; but now their religious obedience, formal in the liturgy, struggling in their moral life, tepid or fallible in their feelings, is completely incarnated: the Word has become flesh for them, and they have seen his glory with their earthly eyes; they have *looked upon God, and lived.*

He Who Is Without Sin

There is great irony in today's story. Jesus "passes judgment" on the situation by his famous words

let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone. The irony is that the lynch-mob is assembled in the name of God's law; it was in the name of God's holiness that the Jews executed blasphemers, adulterers, so many others. Jesus' quiet reminder that not one of them is fit to punish in God's name is enough to dispel the mob and defuse the crisis. But the lesson is not over. The point is that there *is* one among them who is without sin; Jesus is the presence of God's holiness, the fulness of the Law, the one who says in the Sermon on the Mount, "I have come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it!" What will this divine figure have to say to humanity caught in the act?

"Mercy And Faithfulness Have Met."

These words from Ps. 84 teach us a great deal. In God there is no difference between mercy - readiness to pardon - and justice. For us imperfect people, there is a difference; for God, justice *means* readiness to forgive. Nothing else would be worthy of God, so it is just for him to be forgiving. *You must be compassionate, as your heavenly Father is compassionate,* says the Lukan Jesus. If there is someone we have to forgive this Lent, we may make it our gateway to repentance with this Gospel as our inspiration. Because we ourselves need forgiveness, we may find courage to come in search of it.

*Fr
Philip*