

I thought the only thing to do today would be to say a few words to you about sin, as it is something we very seldom touch upon, contrary to what many may think. Compared to the diet of thirty years ago, you hear precious little about sin, and much more about salvation.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that this is something of an elephant in our drawing-room, since no-one living in our society can be unaware of crime, of sin, and of the distance between us and the glory of God. We have moved in a single century from a broad, flourishing Imperial confidence, to a fractured, broken-hearted, disinherited frame of mind which leaves everyone with a vague sense of dishonour and bewilderment. Self-esteem is at an all-time low, a massive percentage of us is sustained by tranquillisers and haunted by anxiety. The moral tone of the media is squalid, and the assumptions most people make about modern life are depressing at best. We have stopped talking about sin because we can't bear to face up to it; we have almost decided that it is inevitable, that it is triumphant over our lives and our communities.

You could almost say that, when we Christians call people to come to Christ, we are asking them to come very much as this poor woman comes in the Gospel. No-one would wish themselves into her situation: her life is in danger, she is exposed in her frailty and hasn't got a prayer. I think it is true to say that most people avoid religion because they know their lives would not bear scrutiny.

The practice of coming to confession used, at its best, to address this problem. It made us face our weaknesses, and regularly tell someone else about them; this putting-into-words the state of our lives was a good thing, if (like many other healing processes) uncomfortable; it broke the awful sham of pretending that all was well, it made an oasis of truthfulness which was significant and powerful. At its best, it also brought a great gift: the feeling that our true self had been addressed, with words of love, hope, and consolation; that we had been listened to with sympathy and given experienced advice. By this we put ourselves on the map of the faith, we were personally assured that our worst deeds did not separate us from the love of God and the hope of salvation.

The alternative, where we deny our sins, clutch them to our secret selves, and make up an excuse to ourself for every way we've fallen short, everything that has defiled our lives and darkened our self-knowledge, seems unspeakably thin and sad by comparison.

The woman in today's Gospel is hauled before Christ as a judge. Is that how you think of him? If so, read on, and see what kind of a judge he is. First of all, he re-establishes community between her and her accusers. All have sinned, and all must bear together the consequences of sin. They're quite real: this woman is really seriously sinful, and the horror of the lynch-mob, the absence of the adulterer, and the ghastly penalty should never blind us to that. But to pretend to separate her from others because of it is a lie, and elaborates the sinfulness of what happens. Jesus defuses all of that very simply. *Let the one who is sinless cast the first stone.* He knows that no stone will be thrown at her. And then he speaks words of reconciliation and forgiveness to her, and sends her off to take up the burdens of her life: *Go, and sin no more.* There's no denial of sin here. But nor is there any note of punishment. There is the pure beauty of the Word of God, spoken to a real person in a moment of dire peril. Let us hope to hear such words ourselves, in these last days of Lent.