

## Homily **5th Sunday in Lent - Year C** (7.4.19)

I don't know whether you've been following current affairs in the news and that gospel, about stoning, is so apt in the light of today's or this week's news about the country that intends to enforce Sharia law, including stoning of homosexuals, chopping off hands of thieves. And it raises the whole question of

**“What is law, and what is sin?”**

Now, in the primitive world there was no separation between an understanding of a people, not a nation, a people and their religion. And the two were fused in such a way that people couldn't conceive of anything beyond that. So, whatever religious rules they had, that was also the law. And so if you were an Aztec, human sacrifice was quite normal. I'm glad I wasn't an Aztec. And the Jews, of course, were a tribal people, and by the time this question was put to Jesus about stoning, and by the way out of interest that law had been commuted by the time of Jesus. It was not put into practice in effect, so that's interesting. So that's why it said they put this question to test him to see if he would defy the law of Moses. And of course, Mohammad, the founder of Islam, was deeply inspired by the Jews and some of the Christian teaching. He saw that his people couldn't follow either faith being a different nomadic tribe. And in his vision, he fused most of the Mosaic Law into Sharia law, what became Sharia law. And of course, they practiced this literally.

In the gospel, Jesus refuses to be drawn into whether Moses was right or not, but focuses on the **nature of sin** as opposed to **law breaking**. He made a distinction between what was criminal, I think, although they wouldn't have used those phrases, and what was moral. And that's why he did this very clever tactic of whoever did not sin cast the first stone and so he was challenging the authority of the Mosaic Law which was built on by human tradition from the original 10 commandments.

And Christians, of course, were in defiance of the Roman empire and on the fringes, and they certainly practiced, those brave early Christians, a morality that was superior to any law or rules of any other society. For example, they wouldn't expose deformed children at birth, which was standard in the Roman Empire. Why let somebody drain resources, who couldn't walk or talk or move? So they put them in the woods as babies and let the animals eat them, but the Christians opposed this saying all life was a gift from God.

Because of the Christian tradition the dignity of all human life developed in the Western world. But with the peace of Constantine in the 4th century this led to the concept of state and church being fused. And once you put the civil with any religion, the civil authority is going to use religion to prop up its authority and vice versa. And so every church, even after the reformation, can't claim no guilt in applying Mosaic law literally, and forgetting their Christian inheritance of defiance. But the issue still stands. Jesus confronts us today with this woman, and this woman is you and me when we fail. And that's why Saint Paul picked up so strongly on this, in that second reading and elsewhere, the difference between law and sin.

Saint Paul never said the law wasn't right. What he said was the law shows you how you fail and what is right and wrong. And he added you can't rely on the law to make you holy.

**"I don't rely on my own efforts,"** he said,

**"I rely on the grace of God through faith in Christ Jesus."**

But he did add, it looks like a contradiction, but he did add that we have to use a lot of effort. He said,

**"I run the race. I keep on running, straining, looking ahead to the victory."**

So he gives these two contrasts. Our response, and that's what Lent is about, is about running the race and not giving up. On the other hand, if you rely on the law and say,

**"Oh, I've done this and I've done that. I've obeyed this, I've obeyed that",** you will fail at some time, and the law will not justify you. But faith in Christ Jesus opens up to the mercy of God when we fall. That's the powerful symbol of the stations of the cross with the three falls of Jesus. I know they weren't moral falls, but they remind us that we don't have the full energy always to complete the course. And so Saint Paul says those who want to follow the law will suffer the fate of the law. But sin is a different thing. Sin is about failing in that running the race. But grace and faith pick us up and point us to the completion of the Easter mystery.