

**First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21****Second Reading: Philippians 3:8-14****Gospel: John 8:1-11**

### **OVERCOMING SIN**

Is it true that we Catholics focus too much on sin? Always talking about sin, our sinfulness, our faults and failings? Certainly we have heard a lot about sin in the scripture readings of the past several Sundays of Lent. But it is more important to recognise that we Catholics focus especially on God's forgiveness of sin, on the many new chances that God gives to us because of his great love for us, shown by his Son, Jesus Christ!

For instance, last Sunday's Gospel showed us that God is not put off by our wayward lives. He patiently waits for us to come to our senses as the father waited for his rebellious son to come back home and be received with a welcoming feast. The father speaks like our loving Father in heaven: "My son who was dead has come to life again, he was lost and he has been found!"

The Gospel of today goes even further to show that no sin is so great that it cannot be forgiven by our merciful God. The woman caught in adultery had certainly contravened a very serious law and the sentence was clear. She should be stoned to death! Never mind that there obviously was another person who was involved in the same sin but was not being punished!

It's true that in one sense those who brought the woman before the Lord were justified in calling for her punishment. However, the Lord saw through their hypocrisy and challenged them to stone the woman if they themselves were innocent. Left alone with the woman, the Lord refuses to condemn her but admonishes her to stop sinning. By doing so Jesus displays a compassionate approach to human failing.

Even though the Law condemned the woman Jesus did not condemn her. He does not condone the wrong doing. Neither does he commend sinfulness. Jesus goes beyond the sinfulness to reveal what really counts in the eyes of God. And that is to turn away from our old life and turn to the true source of new life. The Law is there to help us stay out of trouble but it is not sufficient to rid us of our sinfulness. The grace of God is what can drive away sins from our lives. In other words, Jesus invites us to a closer relationship with himself if we are to stay out of sin.

Isaiah in the first reading recalls the wonders that God performed in the past by freeing the slaves from their oppression in Egypt. However, by recalling this most important event in the lives of the Jews, he is also reminding them that the same God who liberated their ancestors is about to do the same for them. In fact, God has already intervened favourably in their lives. If they can't see what he has done, it is because they are still thinking of the past. There is no need to look backward in history. God is even right now effecting a new Exodus and will lead his people home.

In the second reading, St. Paul says something similar by stating that his focus is to strive forwards to capture the prize. The past is long gone and what matters is in the future. What lies in the past is a loss and what lies ahead is a gain. What about us? What is our focus in life? Do we always look backwards to our old life of sinfulness? Have we cooperated with God and let him create a new pathway out of our sinfulness in order to allow him to bring us to true life?

That cooperation with God is very important because it demands that we examine what we are doing when we say we are a religious people, a people who follow Jesus and want to build his Kingdom here in Zambia.

Today many people in our nation want to speak of this country as a Christian nation. They want to see such a declaration put into our Republican Constitution. They claim that this nation is under the lordship of God and hence is blessed in so many ways. Well, we know that in God's Kingdom there is justice for everyone and a special care for the poor and the oppressed. That's why our Catholic Bishops stated in a Pastoral

Letter many years ago: "No nation is Christian by declaration but only by deeds, especially by the deeds of justice and concern for the poor."

If Zambia were really a Christian nation then our Government would be working hard to ensure that every citizen of this country would be enjoying fundamental human rights and meeting basic needs. Yet we know that today very few people in our nation lead a full life. The vast majority of citizens struggle to make ends meet. There are many young people who cannot find jobs. Too many women are abused or denied rights. Too many children don't get good education and the poor lack access to decent health care.

To say all this is not to criticise the Government in office today but to remind them of their duty to truly serve the people of Zambia, all the people. When we know that every citizen in this country can't participate actively and fully in the affairs of this nation, it is meaningless to shout about a "Christian Nation"! It's much better to work hard for the reconciliation, justice and peace that the Second African Synod has called us to.

This is why it's helpful during this Lent to be reminded of a distinction between personal sins and social sins. Personal sins are bad deeds that we individually commit – for example, stealing, lying, cheating in a marriage, paying unjust wages. But social sins are the consequences of individual sins, building up structures of oppression (like bad governance), institutions of deceit (like false media), practices of domination (like denial of rights to women), policies of unfairness (like excessive taxes on the poor).

When we celebrate the great events of Holy Week coming up soon, we should remember that Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead to free us from sin, both personal and social. And that is something to remember as Zambia prepares to move into the 2011 elections!

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

1. As a Christian, do you think more about sin or about forgiveness in your life?
2. What for you is the most important lesson to be learned from the story of Jesus' forgiving of the woman taken in adultery?
3. Do you have any special hopes for Easter blessings this year for yourself, your family, your Church, your country of Zambia?

### **COMMUNITY PRAYERS**

- Loving God, you are always forgiving our failings and sins; help us to trust in your great mercy. *Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us!*
- Loving God, your Son Jesus showed great compassion to the women taken in adultery; help all of us to show concern for our sisters and brothers who need your mercy. *Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us!*
- Loving God, you know the many needs of Zambia today; help us to be good citizens who work for reconciliation, justice and peace. *Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us!*