

**First Reading:** Isaiah 43:16-21

**Second Reading:** Philippians 3:8-14

**Gospel:** John 8:1-11

## **DO NOT CONDEMN**

We have all heard several reported cases of instant mob justice in Zambia where people found wanting are beaten or burnt to the extent of killing them. In some countries, too, we have heard stories of stoning to death of adulterers. Many of our people are very quick to judge and condemn. In most cases, those that have not been caught take advantage of condemning others. Perhaps they tend to uphold sayings like in Bemba, "Changa baseka uwacelwa" (the one caught is laughed at most) or in Tumbuka, "Uheni ngwa banyabo" (it is always others who are fault). Most of the times, we are quick to notice faults in others and look forward to see them punished.

But we must learn to see what we should have done that we did not do, that have made things go bad. For example, teaching Christian values to our children, being faithful to our spouses, and not exposing other people's wrongs when we can not offer any solution, but giving advice with brotherly and sisterly love.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent and very soon we will be celebrating the paschal mystery -- the suffering, dying, death and resurrection of Jesus. The forty days of preparations are coming to an end, an opportune time when we as Christians are to re-examine our personal behaviour and required to change for the better by repenting of all our sins.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah tells us about the love of God who even makes a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters. This means that there is nothing that can extinguish God's love for us. The Lord is able to make things anew as long as we repent and we do not call to mind the former things or ponder the things of the past. As one Bemba proverb warns, "Akabwelelo kalalya", expressing the danger of clinging to old bad habits. This is an invitation that wrongdoers must strive hard to perfect their lives. For example, thieves should stop stealing, adulterers should stop being unfaithful, and liars should stop telling lies. In Isaiah 43:19 the Lord is saying he will do something new. Therefore, during these last days of preparations for Easter, let us open up to his will of creating new things in us by repenting in truth. We are his people whom he formed for himself so he cannot fail us nor condemn us. But he always shows his care by calling us to his love and friendship through the sacrament of reconciliation.

We as individuals are of different characters and personalities. Some are like the disciple John who learn quickly and easily confess and then experience the joy of full commitment to God's work. While others are like the disciple Peter, who submit to corrections again and again and learns every lesson the hard way. One thing we can be sure of is that God will never give up on us. He will not leave us alone or lead us towards a second best in our lives but will constantly use circumstances and the influence of the Holy Spirit to build up Christ-like attitudes in us. We only need to be docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In John's Gospel today, we meet the woman who was caught in the very act of adultery. Surprisingly, the adulterous man is not mentioned! This is a clear sign of sexual discrimination. This also happens in our society when women are discriminated against in, for example, decision-making positions. Comparatively, we have more educated men, who even enjoy a bigger number in positions of authority. Sadly, many of our women end up being victims of sexual abuse like the recent cases of trafficking of women from Zambia and other sub-Saharan countries to countries overseas. We must realise that women play a very important role in our society, and hence the need to protect them from

any forms of discrimination and violations of their basic fundamental rights and freedoms. Remember, "If you educate a girl, you educate a nation".

Jesus' response to the accusers is a clear testimony of his respect for human rights. He also gives us a challenge to reflect on our own weaknesses first before focusing on other people's shortcomings. A very wise saying is: "When you see a righteous person, praise God; and when you see a sinner, examine yourself". Truly, we must by all means avoid accusing others of their wrongdoings before examining our wrongdoings as well. In our society today we have experienced many politicians who exercise partisan politics and are always ready to point out the wrongs of others while they become mute if their opponent does something good. But we all know that real development can only be enhanced through cooperation and not hate or division.

Moreover, Jesus clearly stress that regardless of the depth of our sins he does not condemn us. But to go our own way, to do our own things is to refuse God's authority and to make a mess of our lives. God does not want us to be flabby, colourless nonentities, who enjoy their own lives to some extent but do not affect the people around them. We can not avoid the non-Christian values in our society but we can avoid being influenced by them just as Jesus did. As the saying goes, "we can't stop the birds landing on our heads but we can stop them building nests in our hairs". During this Lenten season, let us make up our minds to accept God's standards. When you take a driving test you commit yourself to keeping the rules and law of the road. You do not decide one day that you will drive on the wrong side of the road. Similarly, even when we repent, let us keep our minds pure by avoiding materials that can contaminate us and listen to Christ's word which will be able to build us. In this way, we will be able to have the mind of Christ.

Let us also use our words, both spoken and written, to help, encourage and build up other Christians and to bring non-Christians to a fuller understanding of the Kingdom of God. Let us show them the relationship that God wants to live with them, one that does not condemn but cares for them. Let us try this season to accept sinners as Jesus did and help them in the best way possible to convert, so that they may remain committed to the Christian life.

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

- What am I doing to help others know Christ well in my family, and my neighbourhood?
- In what ways do our women face discrimination today, for example, in our traditions, schools, places of work, Parliament?
- What are we doing as a Christian community to help women who have been abused?

### **SKETCH**

Have two people commit the same offence. One is released and the other one is humiliated and condemned in the public. The whole community laughs at him or her. Then, a small child, standing in front of the "condemned" person challenges the whole community by asking them where the other accused person is! One by one, the members of this community shamefully leave.

### **COMMUNITY PRAYERS**

- Lord, we pray for the women who for a long time have been victims of abuse by the structures of our society that they may regain back their lost glory. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray that those in leadership may consider women and put them in vital positions of decision-making. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray for people that have wrongly accused others that they may refrain from fault-finding and concentrate on perfecting their own lives. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*