

The gospel given us for the day is such a telling and dramatic one, with surprising links to today's service of Ash Wednesday. The story we heard read is commonly known as 'The woman caught in adultery', but I would like to rename it as, 'Dust'. Why rename it? Because the story tells us perhaps less about the woman than it does about everybody else who was there – the men and maybe women too in the crowd, and about Jesus, and, as we will see, about dust. I find also that there is more than a whiff of misogyny, of prejudice towards women in that title, linking a woman with an act of adultery but not a man. There is no grace in that title.

It's a vivid scene. They were caught *in flagrante*. The gospel leaves nothing to the imagination: '*caught in the very act of committing adultery*'. She was seized, maybe just wrapped in a sheet, and dragged out into the open street where, had Jesus not intervened, she would have been stoned to death. It is a horrible scene. And of course, where was the man she was with?? Because it should have been *both* of them that were dragged out before the court of public judgement. And there was an ulterior motive, a connivance, at work here: to try and trap Jesus. *Come on, Jesus, speak up! Are you going to contradict Moses who told us what to do now?* And Jesus does a strange thing. He bends down and writes with his finger in the dust. Was it the weight of hypocrisy, of misogyny, of deceit, of hatred, that literally bent his body down? Was it shame that he felt on the woman's behalf? And what was he doing with the dust? Was he writing, naming the sins, the disordered wills of the people in the crowd? Or was he drawing attention to the dust? Genesis tells us that God created humanity from '*the dust of the ground*' (Gen 2:7) and later on, after the Fall, he tells the man, '*You are dust, and to dust you shall return*' (Gen 3:19) – which are the words we will hear later on as we are anointed with ash. So maybe Jesus was subtly reminding the bloodthirsty crowd of their own mortality, their dustiness? *Dust you are, and to dust you will return*. What will you do then with your weight of sin? And then, still bending over, his eyes on the ground, doodling in the dust, quietly but clearly: '*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*' Silence. Then, one by one, beginning with the oldest, the crowd shuffle off, scattering in different directions, not looking at each other, lost in their own thoughts as their own guilt came into focus. The spell was broken. Finally, only Jesus and the woman are left. Listen to the text, it is beautiful: 'Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, '*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*' She said, '*No one, sir.*' And Jesus said, '*Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.*'

The tables were completely turned. The accusers melted away, their consciences mercifully telling them that they are not guiltless, and that they too will one day die and be but dust: and yes, it was a mercy that they discovered this. A mercy for the woman, literally, and a mercy to them. It was grace! The person whose sin, whose disorder was right out in the open, exposed for all to see, she got to stand – notice that, stand, not grovel - before Jesus and be forgiven. Released. Free. Her dignity, which had been stripped from her, was fully restored. Forgiven by the crowd, forgiven by Jesus. A silent bomb exploded grace and mercy to everyone present. For the woman, not condemnation and execution, but restoration and life. For the crowd, not hypocrisy and a hand in murder, but sober realisation of their own guilt – which can lead to repentance and life. Only one person did not receive that grace: the man she was found with. He 'escaped'. Woe to him.

I wonder, if you or I had been present in the crowd, and heard those words of Jesus, what disorder would have sprung to mind and heart? What would conscience have uncovered? What is the habitual disorder, weakness, sin you and I are most prone to? What is it that most often gets in the way of our relationship with God, that stops us from being the person we could be? What trips us up? Self-pity? Self-doubt? Ungratefulness? Hypocrisy? Pride? Hatred? Fear? Greed? Addiction to something? Addiction is a *disordered attachment*. It might be an attachment to wealth, to status, to honour, to security, to a substance, to anything that is not God. It is a form of idolatry. What comes to mind or heart? We may need to sit with that, to come back to it. What disorder of spirit could we seek freedom from this Lent?

In a few minutes we will all receive the gift of ashes. Ashes. Dust. We will be anointed with ashes on our forehead or palm, and these words will be spoken: '*Remember that you are but dust, and to dust you will return*'. May we receive the grace of recognising our mortality, and in that recognition, let go of whatever it is that burdens us. Amen.