

*"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone"*

One of Jesus' all time best 'gotcha' lines, up there with 'render unto Caesar' and all those other blistering responses Jesus makes to a hostile questioner, leaving those arguing with him stunned into silence and unable to respond. In contemporary parlance, one of those times Jesus owns his opponents.

*"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone"*

Such a great phrase. It neatly turns back the assumptions of guilt and sinfulness onto the accuser, holds up a mirror to the would be righteous so they can see the reflection of their faces, not angelic as they would like to imagine but ugly-distorted with pride and arrogance and hate.

It's the sort of line we would *love* to deliver; it's the line we *do* sometimes deliver when some outrageous hypocrite prancing naked round his glass house is calling us out for our failings. It's the line, if we've spent a little time meditating on our faith that we would hope would force its way to the front of our attention and hold us in check when we find that we are bending down, reaching for the stones.

*"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone"*

It is an important message: indeed it's central to Christianity and one Jesus returns to it again and again: judge not, lest ye be judged and so on. But it's not the only part of today's gospel we could be concentrating on; possibly it's not even the most important part of the tale. At the very least, the brilliance of 'throw the first stone' threatens to overshadow what actually could, should, be for us the most hope-filled, joy-giving, astonishing words that Jesus utters in the Temple that day, or indeed that he speaks at any time in any place.

Those words are:

*'Nor do I condemn you.'*

It's not got the 'boom' effect of 'throw the first stone', it doesn't leave its listen smarting from Jesus smartness. But what would *you* rather hear?

*'Nor do I condemn you.'*

Slipping back into the tale, we know that none of the crowd has condemned the woman caught in adultery. They have listened to Jesus' killer line 'let anyone among you...' and considered... and realised that they have at least as much to condemn in their own lives as the woman in hers. The crowd has realised, or at least the ones that weren't just copying what everyone else was doing (which is often most of those in a crowd)- starting with the elders, they have realised that their treatment of this woman is little more than distraction tactics— picking on someone else so nobody picks on you— mixed with a bit of team—building. Everyone feels closer to the people in their group when they've found and labelled an outsider. Scapegoating is ubiquitous in human relations and in scant moments Jesus has named to their shame what those angry people are doing. So, realising they are just as culpable as the woman, the crowd goes away now condemning themselves for succumbing to the madness of being a mindless mob.

So.

The crowd had sinned: the elders, obviously, more than anyone else because they've had more time to practice being practicing sinners. But Jesus. Jesus is not culpable. He is without sin. Like us but without sin, so *his* reaction is not motivated by shame, or by fear of receiving back the judgement he metes out. He has no ulterior motive for what he says next and what he says is:

*'Nor do I condemn you.'*

Christians, at least some of them, talk a lot about sin. They also do a lot of condemning, LGBT people know that quite well because we've been the target for a few decades now; but previously it might have been divorcees or single mothers or the feckless poor or witches or savages or infidels or Jews or... well it's a long list. Christians have spent a lot of time condemning.

Despite being told— by Jesus— not to.

There are weasel ways we try to get round being told not to condemn others.

Obviously, *I love you, I forgive you, I don't condemn you*; but the Bible says— insert proof text for what you're condemning— so it's not *me* condemning you it's God. And that's alright then. You're going to burn in hell for an eternity, but it's not *me* who's decided that, I'm only saying it because that's what God has said.

Except.

No.

What God has said, is

*'Nor do I condemn you.'*

Yes, Jesus then said, *'go and sin no more'*.

Do you think that if the woman, as she inevitably would because nobody is without sin except Jesus, if that woman had, having sinned again, been dragged before Jesus once more he would have responded

*'Now I condemn you?'*

Ridiculous.

There's recounted in Matthew's Gospel an incident when Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive someone who keeps sinning. Peter suggests that perhaps seven times might be more than enough. Seven is, after all, quite a big number. You need more than one hand to count to seven. Jesus' response is to say *'forgive seventy times seven times'*. The point of course is not that you count a big number and then stop forgiving; the point is, nobody knows their seventy-seven times tables, so you just keep on forgiving.

And

Jesus does not expect anything from us he does not expect from himself.

*'Nor do I condemn you.'*

Sometimes we have sought to make our faith one of fear. Fear of judgement. Fear of Hell. Fear of eternal punishment. That's what that outrageous, glorious gold reredos and myriad others is about. Fear.

But.

Do not be afraid.

That's something God says a lot when he comes to speak to us, when he sends us his messengers.

Do not be afraid. Fear not.

And we shouldn't.

Because of those words spoken two thousand or so years ago in the Temple.

*Nor do I condemn you.*

We all mess up. Hopefully we will never find ourselves, like the woman in the gospel at the mercy of a baying crowd. But if we did, we could be completely sure, Jesus will never be a part of that mob.

*Nor do I condemn you.*