

Creating space to think

Bible study on John 7: 53 – 8:11

This is a very short and familiar story. It's just 24 lines long in my Bible yet it still speaks across the centuries. Like the short adverts which form the centre of this week's study, it's trying to provoke a big debate from a few brief images.

We know very little about this woman. Her name is not recorded, neither is her age or social status. Where is the man she was caught with? Did she love him? Was she being raped? Was she being paid? Where is her husband? What's the story?

Whatever the full story was, there is enough detail to ensure that the story remains a vivid encounter even two millennia later. Imagine being 'caught in the very act of committing adultery':- the glare of public gaze, the shock, the humiliation. Whether she was 'caught' in an intimate act of love or during the horror of a sexual assault, being dragged into the busy courts of the Temple would be traumatising.

The woman is not even the centre of the scribes' and Pharisees' concern. Her individual act is much less important to them than the opportunity it gives them to trap Jesus. She is merely an object – "a teaching moment" – providing Jesus' enemies with an opportunity to catch Jesus out.

The scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus that 'In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.' At the start of this Lenten course, Moses is a helpless baby, the focal point enabling some women to embrace what little autonomy they have to resist and liberate. Centuries later, Moses is invoked as the lawgiver, the symbol of social order and guardian of religious purity for the Jewish people. Those challenging Jesus knew full well that he is being given an impossible choice – backing the Law of Moses, or the law of the Roman occupiers, which states that only the governor can impose a death sentence. Whether he speaks for rabbinical or Roman law, his enemies can condemn him – either for disobeying the Torah, or for provoking social unrest by defying the Romans. Hardly surprising then, that Jesus says nothing.

Morality is a complex issue. Adultery – the breaking of marriage vows has serious consequences for the individuals involved, their families and the wider community. Marriage is a private matter but it is also a social institution, with an important role to play in building strong communities. It is a place where private and public meet.

Domestic violence is a complex issue for similar reasons. It generally takes place in private, with abusers and abused often making strenuous efforts to make everything look 'okay' in public. And yet domestic violence is a public problem since it reaps a legacy of pain and dysfunction across generations. While only one person may be hit, all around are affected, as the ripples of violence spread. The adverts in this week's study are aimed at breaking this cycle of violence.

We do not know why the woman in this story was breaking her marriage vows but the scribes and the Pharisees clearly see upholding the moral law as a means of upholding social order. Making an example of those who transgress the law educates the population and strengthens social cohesion. For the crowd, the issue is so clear cut that the reasons behind the woman's actions are not even considered. The man, her 'partner in crime' is absent – physically, and as a factor in all the discussions. Her complex personal situation has been made an exhibit for public discussion.

Jesus is being asked to choose between two laws – that of Moses and that of the Romans. The matter is presented as a simple choice about who should judge the woman's misdemeanour. The rabbinic penalty – stoning – is a particularly cruel form of execution. How many misses and painful but harmless wounds are required to kill a person? Stoning was the accepted penalty for adultery precisely because it was a communal penalty. Like a modern day firing squad, it demanded many participants and no one person could be held individually responsible for the death. In a society where honour and vendetta often escalated violence, stoning was proposed as a neat solution. But to take part in a stoning would also be a trauma. Once the frenzy of the crowd dies away – the shouting has stopped, the blood has been spilled – how would the witnesses and those who threw the stones feel?

It is easy for us to make judgements on moral issues when they are presented in the abstract. Domestic violence is wrong – a crime which must be punished. This is now the accepted law of in many countries, including those where these adverts were made. Yet violence the roots and faces of domestic violence are many and far reaching, as the NZ 'It's not okay!' advert shows. It's not just violent physical acts which wound. It's angry words, gestures and the mind games which play out in family life. In human relationships, the triggers of violence are never far from the surface.

Jesus' response to his challengers is silence. He looks at the floor, writing in the dust. His silence creates a space for reflection. It slows the action down. Jesus' enemies keep pressing him for a response but I imagine that they are unnerved, less certain about what is going to happen. Until this moment, the story carries a sense of frenetic energy, the 'thrill of the chase', a woman 'caught' and now used as an object to 'catch' another wrongdoer whose behaviour threatens the status quo. I imagine a large group of men, hurrying so they miss nothing, jostling to hear and see, excited that this might be the moment where they 'trap' Jesus, a man who is a thorn in their side.

The crowd watching and the scribes and Pharisees are not named – they are acting as a group and as we know, people in large groups are capable of things that the individuals in the group might never envisage doing if they were alone. How much of the violence in the world comes from people acting unthinkingly, en masse? How many fights, assaults, rapes, would have been avoided if the individuals in the crowd had thought for themselves and not been swept along by the moment. In taking the momentum out of the scribes' verbal onslaught, Jesus changes the energy of the moment. He creates space for reflection, and although they still press for an answer, the energy of the moment is changed.

Transforming a violent confrontation into a moment for reflection and growth is a miracle. This is a risky encounter and a powerful one, which accounts for the fact that it made sufficient impression of Jesus' followers to be recorded in John's gospel. Such encounters are required whenever mob violence threatens to overwhelm people's gentler instincts – an angry crowd, especially one high on moral outrage, is a lethal weapon which can go off in any direction. No wonder Jesus said that the peacemakers were blessed.

In the silence, people have the chance to recognise their own role in proceedings. In this silence, did the scribes think of their own marriages, their own desires, and their

own moments of failure? Did they take the time to imagine how the woman was feeling?

The tempo is changed so Jesus is able to answer the still pressing question – ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first one to throw a stone at her.’ Once the crowd is defused, they can hear Jesus’ words as individuals and once again see the humanity of the woman who has up to now been a teaching aid on moral law. Throwing the first stone, would be in, effect, taking responsibility for her death. Whoever takes responsibility for her death would then face the fact that he also deserved death for his sins, his transgressions.

Much of the Law of Moses, developed during the years of wandering the desert, waiting to enter the ‘Promised Land’, was designed as a Public Health programme for keeping a nomadic community socially and physically fit and cohesive. The ideals of the commandments make sense in terms of promoting social cohesion and curbing individual desires through social norms. Even today, when new public health initiatives are introduced – compulsory wearing of seatbelts in cars, smoking bans, fluoridating of water supplies – there will always be some complaints that individual freedoms are being sacrificed for the sake of wider health gains. For the scribes and Pharisees it is obvious that the individual needs of the woman are not as important as the needs of the community.

The domestic violence adverts also aim to create a community around a set of ideals. In order to challenge domestic violence, people need to be aware that it exists in all parts of our societies. In the series of Indian adverts, Bell Bajao! (Ring the Bell!), bystanders are invited to interrupt the private violence they can hear taking place, by literally ringing the doorbell. Exactly as in the John reading, the intention is to create enough space for the perpetrator to reflect, however, momentarily, on his actions. This brief interlude may be enough to break the cycle, at least this once. Bystanders are reminded that they are active participants in any situation and they have a duty to respond.

The UK ad features Kiera Knightley, famous for her film roles and beauty – a reminder that beauty, wealth and fame cannot protect against violence, and that the stigma which causes many victims to remain silent can be particularly strong for those who appear ‘successful’. It is the stigma which is addressed in the final line of the NZ ad – ‘But it is okay to ask for help’ – a reminder to both victims and perpetrators that, with support and time, the cycle of violence can be broken.

Our attitudes are shaped by the societies in which we are raised. We inevitably think ‘like the crowd’ in many respects. Many people still believe that what happens in the privacy of home and family should not be legislated on by the state. Some even use biblical texts to justify violence against wives and children. It will take more than a thirty second film to break down years of cultural denial and tacit acceptance. But creating space to reflect on our attitudes and actions is the first step on the road to change. This is the method Jesus uses again and again in the gospels – grabbing people’s attention, making them re-examine beliefs that they had taken for granted.

Once the crowd has been sufficiently unsettled, Jesus offers his suggestion for how to run the stoning. He doesn’t challenge their right to kill the woman directly – which makes his intervention all the more powerful. The crowd is full of self-righteousness

– someone has broken the law and they have the right to exact the penalty. They are expressing their fidelity to the Law of Moses, an ancient law which holds them together in their identity as a people. For a people oppressed and challenged by foreign occupiers, this group identity is a powerful feeling.

Being part of a crowd can suppress our feelings of individual responsibility. To be swept along in a wave of people sharing the same emotion can be a glorious, intoxicating feeling – when our team wins, when our favourite singer is given a standing ovation. But if the crowd is a mob which runs riot, there is no warm afterglow – just the cold guilt and shame of being carried away.

By suggesting how to run the stoning, Jesus is fast-forwarding his attackers to that moment. Self-righteousness and moral outrage often spring from self doubt – the desire to strengthen my belief in myself by putting someone else down. When our identity depends on putting another group down, it can be ugly. When the mob descends from the certainty of the moral high ground, it is often to the shameful depths of self doubt. In his gentle but firm reminder that all humans fall short of perfection, Jesus is allowing each person present to recognise his own weaknesses and calling him to act with compassion.

In a short passage, it is significant that Jesus' body language is repeatedly referred to – he bends down, he scratches writing into the dust on the ground. This is not a defiant rebuke which might further inflame the crowd. It is a low key response, deliberately defusing the aggressive posturing of those confronting him. It takes courage to stand one's ground without aggression. Jesus embodies the place between the direct eye contact which can escalate violence and the meek passivity which is too weak to meet the challenge. With one sentence, he has quieted the violence of the moment and dispersed the mob. It is the elders who walk away first – those whose self-knowledge has had longer to develop. The mob left 'one by one' – each person taking their own time to hear Jesus' challenge and reflect on their own experience. A good orator can turn gathered individuals into a cohesive group, but only a remarkable person can turn an angry mob into thoughtful individuals.

There is no record of what happened to the woman. How could her life not have been changed by such an encounter? We know that Jesus had not dispersed the angry mob permanently. Within a few chapters, a crowd would be yelling for Barabbas to be saved in place of Jesus. How many of that crowd had been in the temple on this day?

How the message is delivered is clearly important. Had Jesus used different body language or different words to confront his challengers, the results might have been very different. The suggestion that one without sin should begin the stoning is very different from a bald accusation of hypocrisy. How do we spread the message that violence against women must be halted? How do we curb the violence in our own hearts and homes? How do we stand against the casual violence of a media-saturated world? What is our role in dispersing the angry mob? Today, as 2000 years ago, Jesus calls us into honest encounter – with ourselves, with our world and with the God of peace who calls us to wholeness.

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