**Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent, Year C**

**April 3, 2022**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21 (Remember not the events of the past.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 126 (The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.)*

*Second Reading: Philippians 3:8-14 (I consider everything as a loss, because of the supreme good of knowing Christ.)*

*Gospel: John 8:1-11 (Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.)*

It seems a bit odd to hear an Old Testament passage in which God tells his people to forget the past. Any number of psalms and prophetic passages say to do just the opposite: *remember* the past. The Hebrew Scriptures frequently exhort the Jewish people to look back on the marvels that God has done for them and, “Remember the mighty deeds of the Lord!” Likewise, the psalmists frequently appeal *to God* to remember the covenant that he has made with his people and “break it not.” So, why, in this passage from the Prophet Isaiah, does God say, “Remember *not* the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!”?

Well, consider the horrible events that have transpired. This prophecy comes from chapters 40-55, a section referred to as “Second Isaiah.” These chapters were written just as the Exile in Babylon was coming to a close. The Persians had recently conquered the Babylonians, and their King had decreed that all the Jews could return home to Israel. So, there was great relief, but also a collective memory of tremendous suffering. The fall of Jerusalem and the Exile which followed constituted the darkest period in all of Jewish history, even worse than the slavery that their ancestors experienced in Egypt before the Exodus. Certainly, there were lessons to be learned from all of this hardship. But, perhaps it was even *more* important for God and his people to put the suffering behind them, to reconcile, and to move forward together. The Lord’s words could be an exhortation to the Jewish people to forgive God for abandoning them to their enemies, allowing their nation to be crushed and their people to be enslaved again. Or, the Lord might be saying that he is willing to forget the people’s repeated infidelities, which led to their destruction. Most likely, both meanings are intended. The Lord could be lamenting the fact that the people never repented of their sins *and* that he followed through on his threat to abandon them in their hour of need. Now God is saying: “There has been too much evil, too much punishment, and too much suffering. Let’s start over, putting the past behind us and recommitting ourselves to a covenantal relationship. Be my people once again, and I will be your God once again.”

That’s how reconciliation works. While it certainly helps when the parties who cause injury can acknowledge their guilt and ask for forgiveness, the real breakthroughs come when aggrieved parties can acknowledge their *hurt* and choose to let go of any lingering pain and resentment that they still feel. Then, and only then, can both parties put the events behind them and heal their relationship. And, since most interpersonal conflicts involve some measure of hurtful conduct on both sides, what is often needed is a mutual apology and a shared commitment to start over. That means that both parties must choose mercy over judgment.

Today’s gospel deals with that choice of mercy over judgment. The woman presented to Jesus has committed a very serious crime. She and her lover have been caught in the act of adultery. The situation is clear, and so is the penalty: *both the man and the woman* shall be stoned to death. However, it appears that the accusers are not really concerned about carrying out justice. Otherwise, the woman would not be standing there alone. She and her lover would be standing *together* to face the same judgment, as the law demanded. Obviously, the whole point of this exercise is to test Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees want to see if Jesus’ compassion will get the better of him and cause him to speak against the Law of Moses in this case, where the law permits absolutely no discretion in terms of punishment. If he challenges the law, *he* could be condemned along with the woman. But, if he condemns her, even under these circumstances, he will call into question his own teachings about forgiveness and mercy. So, will he choose to be a lawbreaker or a hypocrite? Will he deny justice or deny mercy? As usual, when confronted with a no-win situation, Jesus finds another way, which no one anticipated. He turns the spotlight away from the woman and her sin, and puts it squarely on the people in the crowd and *their* many sins.

The Law of Moses stipulated that when a person was convicted of a crime, the accusers who testified against the criminal were entitled to carry out the prescribed sentence. So, in this case, the ones who caught the woman in adultery should be allowed to cast the first stones at her. But, Jesus turns the tables on them. Rather than questioning the woman’s guilt or the justice of the death sentence, he simply demands that the first people to throw stones at her should be those who are *free from sin*. Notice, he doesn’t accuse anyone of anything. He doesn’t try to stop anyone from picking up a stone. He just challenges everyone in the crowd to examine their own conscience *first* and then consider whether they are worthy to cast judgment on someone else. Fittingly, it is the wise elders who walk away first, followed by all the rest. It appears that all of them are aware of their own guilt, but that awareness does not move them to compassion for the woman *until* Jesus makes that connection for them. Jesus helps them, and all of us, to see how unjust it is to deny mercy to someone else while hoping to receive mercy for ourselves.

One important detail to note in the story is that Jesus does not in any way excuse the woman’s conduct. In fact, he tells her very directly, “From now on do not sin anymore.” He acknowledges her sin, but refuses to condemn her for it. That is an important distinction for us to make as we deal with our fellow sinners. It is not hypocritical to point out sin when we see it. In fact, we can do a great service to our brothers and sisters by confronting them gently and lovingly in order to turn them away from sin. However, we must always be mindful of *our own sin* and our own desire for mercy, so that we can avoid the temptation to condemn others or judge them harshly. For reconciliation and healing to take place, we must be willing to look honestly at the painful events of the past and then *reject* our urge to judge and condemn. That is not an easy thing to do, but it is the only way to achieve peace and start anew.