

Sermon – Ash Wednesday – 26th February 2020 – 8 pm

In a world where you can be anything, be kind.

I wonder if Jesus might have said something similar in the situation he found himself in in this evening's gospel reading, that familiar story of the woman caught in adultery. They probably weren't the words that he wrote on the ground, but they would have been quite fitting. Imagine the scene. It's early morning, Jesus has entered the Temple, and crowds are gathering to hear him teach. Then suddenly in come a group named only as scribes and Pharisees, who bring in a woman, make her stand at the front of the crowd, and explain her misdemeanour. She has, apparently, been caught in the very act of committing adultery, and the law requires that she be stoned.

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Some of you will recognise those words, taken from an Instagram post written by Caroline Flack, former presenter of Love Island, who died on 15th February at the age of 40. A familiar face in the media, having won Strictly Come Dancing in 2014 and presenting a range of reality shows, most notably Love Island, Flack was open about the pressures of press intrusion in her life. This reached a whole new level at the end of last year when she was charged with assaulting her boyfriend and stood down from her Love Island role.

I wonder, is her situation so very different from that of the woman in our gospel reading? Someone who may, indeed, have made a mistake, though let's be clear, the case had not been proved, and her boyfriend was standing by her. Yet who came to feel increasingly desperate.

Jesus's words to those pursuing the woman caught in adultery were these: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Perhaps today's equivalent might be, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to pursue someone relentlessly for a story. To dig the dirt. To seek controversy. To put someone up on a pedestal, only to pull them right down."

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Lent is a time for reflection and taking stock, and I wonder whether those words of Caroline Flack might be a very good place to start our Lenten reflections. Not least because they are so very similar to so much that Jesus seemed to embody.

Perhaps the thing that I find the most compelling about the story of the woman caught in adultery is its apparent simplicity, yet the profound message that it carries. We have heard it so often, that Jesus's reaction seems obvious. But really it's far from obvious. You might have found yourself in equivalent situations to the one confronting Jesus, where there appears to be a conflict between upholding the rules and the wellbeing of individuals.

The thing is, rules are important – for the most part they have been created in order to secure our wellbeing. And we all know that if we simply disregarded all rules, things would go very wrong very quickly. And yet if we know that the rules are there to secure wellbeing, we cannot be blind to those situations where the rules actually do damage. Which is why Jesus finds a more important principle. He turns the situation around to ask those who are pursuing the woman to consider their own

wrongdoing. He exposes their willingness to judge the woman, rather than focussing on putting their own houses in order. Judgement is for God, not for us. Our focus should be elsewhere.

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The thing about kindness is that it may not be as deceptively simple as it sounds. And perhaps that is why it might not be a bad start for our Lenten reflections this year. In my experience, most of us want the best for ourselves and one another most of the time. So I wonder why it is that so much abuse and hatred is posted on various forms of social media. And I wonder why it is that a significant part of our press delights in sensationalised stories that damage individuals.

Now, I don't think for a moment that by the end of Lent we at St. Mary's will have solved the problems of the media. And neither am I trying to depress us all with our powerlessness in the face of real social challenges.

What I'm saying is, I wonder whether a good starting point for our own Lenten devotions this year might be those words of Caroline Flack: In a world where you can be anything, be kind. I hope that for each of us those words might take us in different directions, because I expect that God might be calling us to different things.

For some of us, being kind might need to start with being kind to ourselves. Perhaps you've had a tough year and need a bit of looking after yourself this Lent. Perhaps it's a time when you need to spend some time resting in God's love.

Some of us might feel a strong call to some kind of social action or acts of generosity. Being kind by giving something of what we have in terms of time or money. Being kind by taking the time to consider where there is a need that we might be able to meet.

Sometimes in order to be kind we need to spend a bit of time reflecting on what it is that can make us less than kind. This isn't easy, I know, and of course I'm probably the only one here who has ever had an unkind thought, so bear with me. But sometimes it can be our own anxieties and stresses that lead us to lash out at others. And during Lent we might find a little time to spend with God, bringing those difficult feelings, and asking for God's grace. After all, God knows those things anyway and loves us, so perhaps we might find that experiencing that love could lead to some kind of change.

Kindness is about what we do outwardly. And it is also about how we feel inwardly, because it's impossible to sustain kindness without an underlying awareness that we are loved and can give love. I hope and pray that we will all find ways to draw closer to God's love this Lent. And that we will be guided by those words.

In a world where you can be anything, be kind.

Amen