

“CASTING STONES”

John 8:1-11

It started off as a fairly ordinary day. The Teacher was there, as he so often was, sitting in the Temple courtyard, sharing his thoughts with the small crowd that had gathered. They stood around him as he sat, just as the Rabbi should, and spoke of the Kingdom, of hope, of love, of all those things that the prophets had looked forward to. And when he spoke, he spoke with such conviction, such authority that you actually believed it was all going to happen. The general bustle of the Temple courtyard was going on around the crowd – people changing their money for the Temple taxes, animals being exchanged for the appropriate sacrifices, other teachers and Rabbis sharing their wisdom with, admittedly, smaller crowds.

Suddenly, above the general hubbub could be heard the sounds of angry shouting, a woman’s voice pleading for release between deep sobs, the gleeful cries of young children eager for a spectacle. The noise grew louder and the other conversations and monologues around the courtyard grew quieter. The crowd around the Teacher parted to allow through this bunch of apparent rowdies. Two or three of them threw at the Teacher’s feet the distraught figure of a woman, her face streaked with tears, her clothes in disarray. With a coolness that many found impressive, the Teacher looked up at the interlopers.

It was obvious from their clothes that they were Pharisees. And some of the faces were easily recognisable as teachers of the Law: they were often seen here in the courtyard haranguing the worshippers for their many faults. A shocked hush fell over the crowd and one of the Pharisees, his face purple with outrage and anger, confronted the Teacher. “Well, Jesus, what do you have to say about this, then?” He pointed at the sobbing figure crumpled up on the ground. “We’ve just caught her in the very act of adultery.” He spat out the words with a venom that made the crowd gasp. “So what do you say we should do? The Law of Moses says she should be stoned to death. Would you go along with that?”

Jesus didn’t even meet his gaze. He looked down to the ground and actually started scribbling in the dust of the courtyard. No-one could quite make out what he was writing, but he seemed to be concentrating hard on the ground, ignoring the blustering Pharisees. After a few awkward moments of silence the Pharisees started up again. “Come on! Let’s have an answer. You say you uphold the Law of Moses. Are we to stone her to death? What’s your opinion, Teacher? Where do you stand on this?”

Slowly, he looked up and then sat up straight. His steely gaze met theirs and they seemed to flinch slightly. “Go on, then,” he said. “And those of you who have never done anything against the Law of Moses can start the throwing. That’s right, the person who has done no sin can be the first to throw a stone at her.” And with that he crouched down and went on with his writing in the dust.

Another awkward silence. None of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law and their hangers-on looked at each other. Their knuckles, previously whitened with rage around their stones, relaxed. A stone fell to the ground as one of them turned and walked away. Then there was the dull sound of more stones dropping into the dust. And one by one the crowd drifted away – the older, wiser ones first – their heads bowed in embarrassment and shame. Slowly the woman stood up and looked around at the astonished faces of those who had been listening to Jesus, and at the departing backs of her lynch mob. Silence fell as the last shuffling footsteps died away and Jesus stood up to look the woman in the eyes.

“Where have they gone, then?” he asked her. “Wasn’t anyone prepared to go through with it? Didn’t anyone have the guts to condemn you?”

“No-one, sir,” she whispered.

“Then I’m not going to condemn you, either,” he said. “Off you go – but don’t you ever do anything like that again. Sort out your life and get it cleaned up.” And with that the woman walked away into the people thronging the Temple courtyard, and Jesus sat down to continue his teaching.

What was that all about, then? Well, John, who records that story in his gospel, suggests that the Pharisees and their co-conspirators wanted to trap Jesus, to provoke a response from him that would give them an opportunity to condemn him. But it was a clumsy set-up and they hadn’t really thought it through. For one thing, they hadn’t even got the Law right to start with. The Law of Moses to which they referred did indeed lay down that those caught in this way should be stoned – but only if the woman was a betrothed virgin. When Jesus refers to her “*life of sin*”, the implication is that she wasn’t still a virgin. The Law also said that *both* people involved should be executed, and if this woman was caught in the act, presumably the man was caught in the act too. But where was he?

Why did they go to all this trouble, then? What was the real reason for their ham-fisted attempt to get Jesus to incriminate himself in front of so many witnesses? Well, these men had a problem, I reckon: in fact, they had several problems. They had a **problem with Jesus, a problem with the people and a problem with themselves**. Mind you, they weren’t the only ones. We begin this New Year with problems of our own which mirror to some extent the experience of these Pharisees, and it’s not a bad idea to try and deal with those problems right at the beginning of the year so that we can move on into what God has in store for us in 2002 with no encumbrances.

1. PROBLEMS WITH JESUS

These men set this whole thing up as a trap for Jesus, according to John. That’s where their problems began. They didn’t seem to be able to accept **who he was**. He claimed to be the Messiah, to be the Son of God – and that didn’t fit in with their own world view. They knew what the Messiah would be like. As they interpreted the words of the prophets, they had set out the criteria for any Messianic pretender to fulfil – and Jesus didn’t fit. They wanted a Messiah who would conform to their views, a Christ who agreed with them, who fitted their little box. They wanted a Messiah they could manage.

They couldn’t accept **what he did**. These miracles, they must have been done with the help of Beelzebub. Jesus must be an agent of the darker side. They tried to explain it all away – and if they couldn’t explain it, they’d smear it, they’d help the people to see that this man was a charlatan. Nor could they accept **what he said**. The people thought he spoke with authority, but they knew that he had none. He was teaching heresy, blasphemy. It didn’t fit in with what they wanted said. It undermined their own dogma and doctrine – and they didn’t like it. So as their fingers tightened around the stones, they were wanting to get even with Jesus even more than they wanted to punish the woman.

How about you? Do you have problems with Jesus? Do you find him saying and doing things that don’t quite fit in with what you want? Do you find him a nuisance and an irritant with all his talk of holiness and distinctiveness, with the ethics of his Kingdom, with his call to a life of love? Do you want a Jesus you can manage – a domesticated Jesus, a God-in-a-box who is not going to interfere too much with your life this year? Do you want a Jesus who is a good man and a good teacher, but who doesn’t mess up your cosy little worldview with anything supernatural? If you do, you’ve got problems and you need to sort them out.

2. PROBLEMS WITH THE PEOPLE

As they strode through the Temple courtyard these Pharisees wanted people to see them. As they shuffled back out after Jesus’ rebuke, they wished the people had seen nothing of their humiliation. They

had some problems with those people, you see. These Pharisees and Teachers of the Law wanted to have some kind of control over them. They wanted their authority to be seen. After all, they were, so they thought, the guardians of the Law and of the nation's morality. They needed to be seen to be in control. And the people didn't seem to be according them the respect they felt they deserved. On top of that, they wanted to be seen as holy people, as pious devotees of their religion. And that image was starting to get a bit tarnished after their various encounters with Jesus. As their fingers tightened around those stones, they were hoping to re-establish their holiness and their authority in the eyes of the others even more than they wanted to punish the woman.

Do you have that problem, perhaps? People don't grant you the respect you feel you deserve. You're a very holy, very pious person – but people just won't recognise it. You're the one with the words from the Lord, with the more obvious gifts of the Holy Spirit, the one who knows which way we should be going. But no-one takes any notice of you, however hard you try to let everyone know of your holiness. And you resent that. You resent the fact that you aren't constantly being consulted, that you're not the centre of attention – maybe even that you haven't got the particular gifts that others seem to have. If that's your problem, it needs sorting out before it poisons your relationships and your walk with God this year.

3. PROBLEMS WITH THEMSELVES

Maybe it was that simmering resentment that they couldn't handle. Maybe this aggressive attempt to make a name for themselves was a way of trying to let off some of that steam. They were frustrated because it didn't seem that they had the same kind of peace or joy that Jesus seemed to have. As they struggled day by day to live life the way they believed it should be lived, they were losing out on any sense of satisfaction – because they were always going to fall short, they could never live up to those standards in their own strength.

Partly, maybe, that led to a sense of their own guilt. They had a religion in which they were always doomed to fall short. They couldn't get their heads round the idea of grace. They had to be striving all the time – and they could never do enough. So there was resentment and bitterness. Secretly, maybe, they wished they could have enjoyed what the woman and her partner were enjoying. Or maybe they wanted somehow to use this as a way of overcoming their resentments about other things. Rather than accept what Jesus himself was offering by way of reconciliation with God, they wanted to sort it out themselves and this is how they were going to do it – by hurling rocks at someone else. As their fingers tightened around those rocks they were hoping that they could expunge their problems in a hail of stones and vitriol even more than they wanted to punish the woman.

How about you? Are you starting this new year with still unresolved tensions weighing you down? Are there things you need to get off your chest now, if you are to receive the good things God has for you in the year ahead – unconfessed sin, festering resentments, unresolved conflicts with others? God wants you to move into this new year wholly reconciled to him, assured that your sins are forgiven, at peace with your friends and neighbours. You cannot sort that out yourself: you need the help of Jesus. He died on the cross so that you could know peace, so that you could have the joy of a new start. But while you are still hanging on to those resentments, those problems, while you are still afraid to deal with those areas of bitterness and frustration, while you refuse to come to him in real repentance, then he cannot work as he wants.

It's a new year. I know it's an arbitrary time to do all this – you could just as well do it in the middle of June or the end of September – but there's an opportunity this morning to put the past behind you, to unload all those problems on to Jesus and accept his peace and his release. Lay down those burdens, give up your own hang-ups, allow him to release you from your frustrations and cares. And then you can move forward into the new year ready for all the good things God has in store for you. Jesus died for

you, so that your sin and sadness could be dealt with. Jesus was brought back to life for you, so that you could have a powerful and certain hope for the future.

This morning there's an opportunity to **do** something – something symbolic, but something that can be the outward sign of an inner change. *“O let him have the things that hold you ... give him all your tears and sadness, give him all your years of pain, and you'll enter into life in Jesus' name.”* They're lines from the next song we're going to sing, ***O let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love*** (MP502). We'll sing this together as we pray that Jesus will come and fill us – and then we'll **do** something.

(Song)

As you came in this morning, you were given a stone – probably a bit smaller than the ones the Pharisees would have had – but that stone is a symbol of the problems that you carry with you from last year, from the year before that, from many years ago, perhaps. They are problems that haven't been resolved – maybe a particular pattern of behaviour that you know is wrong for you and you need to shake it off; maybe a simmering resentment that you keep thinking you've overcome, but it keeps resurfacing; maybe a bitterness that has taken hold of you and seems to be strangling your life; maybe a frustration that you know you need to deal with, but you can't seem to get any peace about it; maybe an anxiety that you're trying to cope with on your own but you know, deep down, you need to hand it over to Jesus; maybe all of those things and more.

We're going to listen to a piece of music now.. It's called ***I Surrender*** and the words are *“I call out to you, my Lord, hear the cry of my heart. Change me to be like you, I pray. Come, Lord Jesus, have your way. I surrender all to you.”* As the music plays, you can sit quietly where you are and pray, or you can come out here and put your stone in this basket at the foot of the cross – a way of saying that you want to give it all over to Jesus and to begin the new year with a clean slate, as it were.

Having rid ourselves of the bad things, we need to ask God to fill those areas of our lives with something good, with his Holy Spirit. So let's now ask for the Holy Spirit to fill each of us, so that we can be the people God wants us to be in 2002 – and beyond.

***Almighty God, thank you for taking away the things that have troubled us.
Come now, by your Holy Spirit, and fill us with your power and your peace.
Pour your Holy Spirit into our lives, into every part of them.
We open ourselves to you and surrender all to you.
Change us to be like you, we pray.
Renew and revive us. May we experience your power today.
And may we continue to know that power as we live and work for you in the year ahead.
We pray in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.***

Now we have an opportunity to share the peace that God can give with one another. Turn to those around you and greet them with the words, *“The peace of Christ be with you.”*

A PRAYER FOR THE NEW YEAR

Heavenly Father, we thank you for calling us to be your people, and for bringing us together as a local church.

We realise that without you we are nothing and we pledge ourselves afresh today to listen for your voice, look for your guidance and obey your commands. May we enrich one another, support one another, love one another and encourage one another.

Grant us the help of your Holy Spirit, for we cannot succeed on our own and we need his strength to help us in every situation.

We pray that you will help us to serve you faithfully wherever you have called us to live and work. We ask that, as your people here in Lichfield, we will always look upward in worship, forward to growth and maturity, and outward in care, concern and evangelism.

We offer this prayer in faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.