

In One Company

Jn 8.3-11

Not long ago I saw a report on Russian TV about a man who had poisoned six members of his family and friends. There was no real reason for it – he just thought it would be interesting. He poisoned his wife, first of all. Then the poison accidentally got into the food of their daughter. He actually hadn't planned on killing her. But on the other hand he also didn't want to give her the antidote; he calmly accepted all that occurred, as if it were something natural; he even observed his daughter's dying process (which lasted half a year) with enthusiasm. He also poisoned a couple of acquaintances; in the end, he tried out his poison on the family of his friends.

The parents, it is true, survived. But their little baby died...

And now just imagine what would have happened if the crowd had caught this poisoner and took him before Jesus.

“The law and justice demand that we execute this monster, or at very least lock him up in prison. What do you say? You, who are so merciful and kind, You, who preach love and forgiveness?” Perhaps in that crowd are observers who know the story from the inside and shudder from what they saw and heard; maybe in the crowd are the parents of the poisoned child... Jesus sits, bending low, and draws something with his finger in the sand. Everyone is watching Him continuously. Now He's raised his head... what will He say? What?

For the people of that time and that culture, the situation described in the Gospel would be not very much less harsh and horrible than what I presented just now. Everything is very simple – a woman, having cheated on her husband, was deserving of death. She had profaned the holy commandment, she had offended Divine holiness. She should be stoned; that's what the Divine law said, and that is how people of that time thought. By the way, the same rule remains in many cultures today.

Yes, for us today the situation from the Gospel story is much less dramatic. Jesus says, in the end, addressing the woman “neither do I condemn you.” Today we can easily imagine a dozen reasons why we could repeat these words with a clean conscience.

Perhaps this woman was gripped by passionate love. She decided to break the law, obeying the irresistible call of her heart, her yearning to be together with the person that she really loved. She risked her life for the sake of this blazing love within her. Can we condemn her?

Or perhaps she simply was a widow and, as was usual at that time, she had no one close to her that could support her. The threat of hunger and death hung above her and her children. It was a real threat. So she had no choice other than to go sell the only thing she had left – her body. She accepted humiliation so that her children would live. Who of us would condemn her?

And, maybe, the reason was even simpler – this woman was the victim of violence on the part of a male. Even today many women who have undergone something similar are frequently told, “You’re the one at fault! You asked for it!” And all the more back then no one tried to figure out who was right and who was wrong – naturally the woman was always at fault. So, as it turns out, maybe everything happened against her will. And now to the pain and humiliation she’s already felt more is added – universal scorn and condemnation. And how should she feel in this situation? And who of us would dare to condemn her?

Yes, in contrast to the situation with the poisoner we can easily imagine many reasons that would justify her behavior in this situation in which she is being accused, and with a clean heart we could endorse the words of Jesus – “neither do I condemn you.”

But here’s the surprising thing – Jesus does not seek such justifications. He doesn’t ask the woman about why it all happened this way. He doesn’t ask questions of others. And the Gospel writer doesn’t say anything about the circumstances that would have made her less guilty or even guilt-free.

Perhaps this woman really is guilty. Perhaps she is guilty of having destroyed someone’s family, or even a number of families; maybe she is the cause of much pain and tears – for no reason, just because she had the desire to play with others’ feelings. Or perhaps she used her beauty to get many privileges, influence, and wealth for herself, all the while cold-bloodedly transgressing the Divine law and affecting the fate of others.

Yes, but even for that we, today, wouldn’t give her the death penalty. However, it would be right to toss a couple of heavy stones her way. Simply because to let a person go with setting an example by her punishment is wrong. Unless, of course... unless she sincerely repented of what she had done and with tears prayed for forgiveness. But we don’t read anything about that in the Gospel! There are no signs of repentance, of deep remorse for what she did...nothing at all! We know neither of any “extenuating circumstances” nor of any signs of repentance....

Jesus did not set up any investigation into what happened, he didn’t dig into the details, he didn’t look for the hidden reasons for what happened. He doesn’t try to dive deep into the woman’s soul.

He doesn't even try to make her feel her guilt. He could have said, for example, "I condemn your act, but I see that you have repented of it, and therefore I say 'go free.'" Or "I condemn what you've done, but I do not desire your death – you need to repent and try to make up for your mistakes. Go and do so!" He could have said, "In itself your act was a bad one, but I see the reasons why you did what you did and they are a good justification, so I do not condemn you." Any pastor in the place of Jesus would have said something like that. But Jesus acts differently. What he says contradicts all logic, all expediency, all common sense. He does not seek any justification.

Jesus does not seek justification. He justifies. "I do not condemn you" – simply like that, without any external or internal basis for doing so. Nothing – not in the woman herself, not in the situation itself – prompts such words. So why did Jesus say it, "I do not condemn you?" What is the reason for these words? Upon what basis does he utter them?

In the midst of all this crowd of teachers and scribes, pastors and pastoral care givers, judges and guardians of public morality and simple people with good sense, among all the actors and readers of this gospel story, Jesus is the only one who simply and without condition says to the sinner, "I do not condemn you." He refuses to condemn her not because she has some clear or hidden justifications - perhaps she has none at all. He refuses to condemn her not because she was, overall, a very good person, despite this one misstep – we don't know anything about the kind of person she was. He refuses to condemn her not because she repents – it is quite possible that she doesn't feel any repentance at all. He doesn't refuse to condemn her because she – despite it all – worships Him, bows before Him as God – there isn't anything of the sort in the story. He simply refuses to condemn her.

There is One who simply does not condemn. Who does not condemn ever. Who does not condemn as a matter of principle. He does not condemn anyone ever. There is no reason to justify oneself before him, to seek out extenuating circumstances or to think them up. It is not necessary to demonstrate to him repentance or to try to artificially call them up within you.

One contemporary Russian rock musician sang: "Before the Lord there is not justification – He Himself is justification." These words fit today's story perfectly. Jesus is not looking for justification for the act of this woman. He simply Himself justifies her. He came into the world not in order to condemn, but in order to justify. To justify even when there is no justification.

Do you remember the story of the poisoner? We tried to imagine what would happen if we brought him, and not the woman, to Jesus... What would He say when, finally, He raised His head? At that

very moment we stopped the story in our imagination. It was too terrifying for us – for me, anyway – to continue. It’s terrifying for me now, too...

Let’s try to come at the situation a little bit differently. Instead of this woman or the poisoner, let’s imagine that they brought me, or one of you before Jesus,. Jesus is in front of us, writing something in the sand. Behind him is the crowd of accusers. And every one of us has something that we could be condemned for! I’m not talking about murder or adultery, though it is possible that some of us have something like that on our conscience as well. I am thinking about simpler, everyday things. Especially about terrifying things. Terrifying for the very reason that they are so “ordinary.” They are terrifying because frequently we don’t notice them. A lie – a big one or a small one. A promise not kept. A cruel word. Bad thoughts. Indifference to another’s pain. A hand not extended to help in time. There are many people around us who could become our accusers, who have the right to stone us. And even if there aren’t such people, if our sin is hidden from human eyes or if people for various reasons would not dare to condemn us openly, then our own conscience will not leave us alone. And its pangs can be more painful than being hit by rocks....

Why look for justification? It is possible to justify any evil, but by such justification it doesn’t become less evil. And this is the tragic thing, that almost any evil is so tied with good that they, as a rule, are inseparable from one another. It’s already too late to repent – very frequently you can’t change what has occurred, and you can’t turn back time. And do we really want to sincerely repent, since we always have such great justifications? We don’t have anything to repent for, if you look at things closely enough. Why are they always accusing us, those people around us and the voice of conscience within?

And here we stand before Jesus, whose head is turned down toward the ground. Behind him is the crowd of accusers. Next to us are the adulteress and the poisoner. It seems that we are in one company with them. The words of Jesus will be addressed to all of us at the same time. That which He says will touch each of us, will touch also this poisoner and this sinful woman. And now He lifts up his head and looks at us. And now He opens his mouth. And what will He say to us now? What will He say to all of us? What!?

Is it too terrifying to continue? A single word will be sounded out to for that poisoner, for that adulteress and for us!

Well, I suppose I should end here. To continue, really, is impossible. It is at this moment that human powers and abilities come to an end. Here only Jesus Himself should speak. And you can know that the Gospel has preserved His words for us.

