

Fifth Sunday of Lent C - God always Gives Us Another Chance

April 3, 2022.

As Pope Francis said in his March 20, 2022 Angelus said: **“Jesus knows that conversion is not easy... given that so many times we repeat the same mistakes and the same sins. We can become discouraged, and sometimes our commitment to do good can seem useless in a world where evil seems to rule... I like thinking that a nice name for God could be *the God of another possibility*”: God always gives us another opportunity, always, always... Brothers and sisters, God believes in us!... As the best of fathers, He does not look at the achievements you have not yet reached, but the fruits you can still bear. He does not keep track of your shortcomings but encourages your potential. He does not dwell on your past, but confidently bets on your future... In this way God accompanies us: with closeness, mercy, and tenderness.”** One of God's main policies in governing the universe is that he always gives us another chance. It may seem strange to speak of God as having policies like government and company. **But if a policy is a consistent way of behaving in the face of specific circumstances, God's habit of giving us another chance definitely qualifies.** This is what the prophet Isaiah tells us in this Sunday's first reading (Isaiah 43:16-21). Through him, God explains: **“Remember not the events of the past... see, I am doing something new!”** God is inviting his people to look to the future with hope. In Isaiah's time, the Israelites were living in exile, as second-class citizens in Babylon. They had been unfaithful to God, and as a result, Jerusalem had long been conquered and its inhabitants scattered and enslaved. There was little room for hope. But in the midst of that situation, God reminds them that he has done wonders for his people in the past, and promises to do so again. It's God's policy to give his people another chance, to bring them back from exile even though they don't really deserve it. Jesus follows the same policy with the adulterous woman in this Sunday's Gospel reading (John 8:1-11). He doesn't ignore or excuse her sin - he acknowledges it and actually tells her to **“go and sin no more.”** But at the same time, he doesn't condemn her. He gives her another chance. It's a good thing God follows this policy. Otherwise, none of us, even saints, could have any hope and God would have to destroy us all. **God's main policy is called mercy. It's called real love in forgiving our sinful, fallen world.**

In Mel Gibson's 2004 award winning movie “The Passion of the Christ”, Gibson depicts the encounter between Christ and the adulterous woman, illustrating the power behind God's policy of giving us another chance. Gibson identifies the adulterous woman as Mary Magdalene, who stays right by Mary's side as they accompany Jesus throughout his Passion. We know Mary Magdalene is the same person as the adulterous woman (in today's Gospel reading) in the movie from a flashback she has at the flagellation courtyard where Christ was flogged and tortured. Seeing Jesus' blood on the paving stones, Magdalene uses her veil to wipe up Jesus' blood. This is a personal gesture because while she is wiping up the blood, she has a flashback of herself as the adulterous woman on the dusty ground when the angry Pharisees are ready to stone her. Then Jesus steps into the scene. We don't hear any words, but we know he is saying: **“Let him who has no sin throw the first stone”**. We see the Pharisees drop their stones and walk off. Then Magdalene's hand reaches out to touch Jesus' foot. She looks up at him with wonder and gratitude. She has been saved. **Jesus reaches down and takes her hand in his, smiles, and lifts her up to a new life.** Then the beautiful flashback ends and we are brought back to the scene in the courtyard. Now the blood she is wiping up means as much to us as it does to Magdalene. It is the blood of the Saviour, the one who is giving himself up to death so we sinners can have another chance. Jesus' great love is his policy. This is what he came to do.

I watched a Chinese movie **Flying straw hat** (會飛的草帽) on Youtube. It tells about Johnnie, a sixth-grade graduate from Beijing, who came to City Baiyangdian (白洋淀) his hometown to stay with his widow aunt for his summer vacation. Here he met his cousins Lily, Lotus and Sammie. Lotus is an orphan and was adopted by Sammie's grandmother. She has been very kind

and compassionate since she was little. She tended and looked after the rheumatic bedridden grandma. She sold the picked lotus and caught fish for money to buy rheumatic medicine for grandma. Lily and her mom also helped out with house chores and gave money to grandma. Sammie's dad and mom, on the other hand seldom visited grandma and said it's too big a burden for them. Lianhua Town (蓮花鎮) is a small town in Baiyangdian. Many people come to sell fish, and Lily's mom and Lotus sold the fish they caught at the market too. One day, Lotus was hit by a tricycle truck on the way back from buying medicine. Lily 's mother took her with a severe bleeding leg to the hospital; while Johnnie and Lily chased the tricycle which accelerated and was gone. However, the owner's hat was blown off. After the two children picked it up, they vowed to catch the bad guys. Luckily Lotus had no broken bones, was hospitalized for a week and discharged. Later, Sammie also joined the detective team. Looking at the label on the worn out straw hat, he suspected that the driver was his father, whose straw hat was also missing. He tried his best to persuade his father to turn himself in to the police for careless driving causing the accident. Instead the father and his wife tried to steal the straw hat in the middle of the night so there would be no evidence, but were caught red handed by the children. Sammie's dad and his mom finally kowtowed (kneeled and bowed down) in front of his sick mother and Lotus and confessed his crime and asked for forgiveness. Grandma looked at her crying grandson Sammie and forgave them. The experience profoundly changed every member of the family. They finally understood what it really means to love one's neighbour as oneself. It means to value them for who they are, not for what they do or have done. Johnnie ended his summer vacation in Baiyangdian and promised his friends he'll be back the next summer.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in the Gospel reading, the Pharisees wanted to destroy the sinful adulterous woman. Jesus wanted to give her another chance. This was Jesus' mission. He came to earth to overcome sin and death with mercy and resurrection. To lead each one of us out of exile and into eternal life, just as God had led Israel out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem. We are Christians. We are Christ's disciples in the world. If his mission was to give people another chance, then our mission has to be the same. When Jesus commanded us to "love one another as I have loved you", he is calling us to be ambassadors of God's mercy. We are to be instruments of the Resurrection. To do so, we will have to suffer, as Christ suffered before he rose from the dead. We will have to die to ourselves, to deny our natural tendencies to anger, resentment, revenge, and criticism. And so, each of us needs to ask ourselves: Is there someone in my life who needs another chance? Is there someone whom I have given up on but God hasn't? Is there someone whom I have condemned, as the Pharisees condemned this adulterous woman? Is there someone I have destroyed by gossip or criticism? Is there someone whom I want to destroy in my heart? Some of us will be able to think of someone right away. Others will need to ask God for light. We have to ask ourselves: are we capable of condemning the sin without condemning the sinner? If we can't separate the sin from the sinner, it may be a sign that we don't really value other people for who they are - God's beloved children - but instead we value them for what they can do for us, for their utility. As Christians we are called to value people simply because they are created in God's image and have been redeemed by Christ. This is the only way to build a truly better world. Today, we need to adopt or re-adopt God's policy. We are called to be a forgiving people, dedicated to reconciliation. When Jesus comes to us in Holy Communion, let's thank him for not condemning us, and let's promise him that, with his grace, we too will do our best to give everyone another chance, especially those who deserve it the least. Amen.