

“Habemus Papam”, and his name is Francis. The choice of a name for a Pope is never a matter of whim. It is the Pope's first act in defining his aims. As a Jesuit, the name Francis would first be for him the name of Ignatius' close companion Francis Xavier, the great missionary to the east. But the Holy Father made it known yesterday that he had in mind the Francis whom most Catholics would first bring to mind - the little poor man of Assisi, who continues to inspire millions through his life of poverty, his seeing God in nature, “Brother sun and sister moon”, and his ceaseless meditation on the passion of Christ which was answered with his bearing the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus' crucifixion in his own body. Francis was told by the figure on the cross at San Damiano “Rebuild my church”. He took this command literally and begged for bricks to restore that church. His task was to be a greater one: to renew the Church of his age.

The Pope himself is a poor man. He comes from the working classes. When appointed Archbishop he refused to live in the episcopal palace, gave up his chauffeured limousine, and travelled by bus. Consistently, after his election he got on the bus with the cardinals; and in a lovely touch, the following day he returned to his hotel to pay the bill.

Last week I spoke about leadership in the Bible. Those who exercise authority in the name of the Lord are always flawed; they never live up to expectations. We must not put the burden of hopes too high on Francis, a man of seventy-six. But if he lives according to his namesake of Assisi, the Church will be renewed. Leadership by example is powerful leadership. May Francis, be the servant of the servants of God, as Francis was the lowest of his community; and by being the servant of Christ raise up the Church, all of us, his sisters and brothers.

The Curia of the Church, in particular the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly the Holy Office, has in recent times been quick to condemn those whom it said were out of line with orthodox thinking. Among those it condemned was the sweet and modest Fr Jacques Dupuis, who was looking at relations of Christians with other faiths. The treatment this unassuming man received was scandalous. May the Church authorities under Francis learn from today's Gospel-passage.

The episode of the woman caught in the act of committing adultery has a curious history. It does not appear in any of the most ancient manuscripts of John's Gospel, though it is a story that was well known in antiquity and Jerome placed it in the *Vulgate*, his Latin translation of the Bible which became the accepted authoritative version for Roman Catholicism. In later manuscripts it was included in different places in John and even found its way into some versions of Luke. Not too silly this as the story has a strong Lukan flavour being concerned with the forgiving and raising up of a lowly and sinful woman - typical themes of the third evangelist.

On any estimation the story is an impressive one. The woman is brought to Jesus probably to trap him. The Law clearly stated that a woman guilty of adultery, proven by the testimony of two male witnesses, was to be killed by stoning. At this time it seems that Jewish courts did not have the power to carry out capital sentences. The Roman kept that for themselves. It is unclear whether in this case the law had run its course or whether this is mob violence about to have its zealous way. Whichever way the Law was clear: and so was the sentence - death by stoning. So was Jesus going to side with the Law and allow the death of the woman, thus putting himself against the rule of Rome; or would he defend the woman, defy the Law and incur the wrath of the dutiful thus losing popular support?

Jesus' magisterial saying resonates with Solomon's wisdom. The law is upheld - and so is the spirit of the Law which was never intended to satisfy the blood-lust of a mob.

So why the patchy history of the narrative? It is such a splendid story, which shows the loving mercy of God in action, why would it be kept out of Sacred Scripture for so long? Precisely because it shows the loving mercy of God in action. The woman, it has seemed to some, gets off too lightly. The first centuries of the Church were a time without a developed penitential practice and what did develop was very severe. If you put yourself outside the Church by committing the major sins - murder, adultery, apostasy (that's denying your faith), then you were out. There was no way back. One strike and you were on the devil's roasting fork. Times of persecution saw a great deal of apostasy as people had to choose between faith and life. Many chose to live and when the persecution abated sought re-entry into the Church. Pastoral strategy allowed them back but only after many years of prayer and penance. In such an environment you might begin to see how the authorities would not favour showing Jesus to be too lenient with a serious sinner.

Happily, the story of the penitent woman survived and its incorporation into Jerome's *Vulgate* means that Roman Catholics have no doubt that it is part of Scripture, the inspired Word of God and it is found in most Christian Bibles too. In the story we see the utter mercy of God, revealed in Christ, which reaches beyond anything we can imagine.

May the institutional Church under Francis become, what the Church among the people has always been, welcoming, non-judgemental, merciful, and readily to rehabilitate the sinner who knows their fault and seeks the healing loving touch of Christ.