

AIDS and Stigmatisation

Following is the full text of a sermon preached on Sunday, 15th October, 2006 by Rev. Dr. Gerry Seale at a National Service launching AIDS Awareness Week in Barbados. The service was hosted by the National Commission on HIV/AIDS and conducted by the Barbados Evangelical Association.

The passage read this afternoon from John chapter 8 records the event widely referred to simply as *the woman taken in adultery*. Let me acknowledge that there is considerable credible evidence that this passage was inserted in John's Gospel some two hundred or more years after the Gospel was written.¹ However, the passage is widely regarded as indeed a part of the canon of Scripture² and so is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."³

It is a fascinating passage that has captivated Christians in every generation. It gives us a small window to look at the Hebrew society in the first century A.D. as well as how Jesus handled those stigmatised by society.

The scene is set in the courtyard of the Hebrew Temple in the early morning. A large crowd has gathered. Jesus is seated, teaching the people. There is a dramatic interruption as some Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman whom they've caught in the act of adultery. They push her to the front and centre where she will be seen by everyone. They then denounce her as an adulteress for all to hear and remind Jesus that the Hebrew Law prescribed death by stoning and ask His opinion.

I have always been mystified as to why a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought by herself. What happened to the man? But then, I have learned that in Hebrew society at the time women were widely stereotyped as instigators whenever sexual sins were committed⁴ and it is perhaps this stereotype that is very strongly on display.

Under the Hebrew law of the time it was almost impossible to get a death sentence for adultery⁵. There had to be at least two witnesses who agreed on all points in their testimonies before the authorities, or the woman was immediately acquitted. One may be forgiven for wondering who was peeping at the key hole and which religious leaders had found this a profitable way to spend the evening before.

The *Mishnah*⁶, Jewish Law of the time, prescribed strangulation for a wife caught in adultery but stoning for a woman caught in such circumstances who was merely engaged to be married, and this is borne out in Deuteronomy 22:22-24. We can therefore conclude that this was a relatively young woman, engaged to be married.

According to the record we have, no one controverted the evidence presented. The accusers were Pharisees, a sect known for their punctilious attention to detail in obeying the smallest detail of the Law. We can be reasonably sure that they would have been careful to ensure that they could prove the charge they so publicly brought against this young woman. Jesus doesn't even ask for the testimony of the witnesses. It seems He ignored them all after saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first."⁷ The point that Jesus was making very bluntly is that none of us is in a position for sanctimonious pontification on the guilt of others while bearing our own guilt before a holy and just God.

The construction in the Geek grammar of the text indicates that one by one the accusers slipped away. Confronted by the standard of being "without sin," who would dare pick up a stone to throw at this young woman?

¹ Gary M. Burge. 2000. *John: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan p.238

² Ibid. p.240

³ 2 Timothy 3:16, NKJV

⁴ Gary M. Burge p. 246

⁵ James M. Boice. 1999. *The Gospel of John, Vol. 2: Christ and Judaism*. Grand Rapids, Baker Book House p.608

⁶ Gary M. Burge p.242.

⁷ John 8:7, NKJV

We'll return to how Jesus dealt with this young woman in a moment. But does this have any relevance to our current situation with HIV/AIDS impacting heavily on our young people? It certainly does, particularly in the area of stigmatisation of those who have contracted the disease. Let's examine this for a moment.

Some opine that fear makes us stigmatise persons who are HIV+. If that is so, that fear is irrational, unreasonable and based purely in emotion without reference to the facts. We've all been inundated with information about AIDS. We all are intellectually aware that AIDS cannot be passed through casual contact like the common cold or other more severe diseases like tuberculosis. We all know this. Then fear about catching the disease by shaking hands with someone, or working in the same office, or sitting in church next to someone with the disease is an irrational fear. It does not make sense. Our society is too small to let irrational fears be the basis on which we relate to each other. We must personally take the step to move the knowledge from our heads to our hearts that our behaviour can be based on our knowledge rather than just on an irrational fear.

Also, let us examine these people whom we stigmatise – the ones who are HIV+.

Some are born with the disease. These people received the disease from their parents. What possible reason could we have for stigmatising them? They have done nothing wrong. They did not asked to be born and certainly would not have chosen to be born HIV+. It makes no sense to stigmatise them. They need our compassion, our love, and our help as they cope with this terrible heritage they have received from their parents, parents who have often died leaving these children to fend for themselves.

Then there are those who have contracted the disease though a blood transfusion. Why should they be stigmatised? They have been infected through the inadequate screening of the blood they received, blood that was supposed to help them fight some other disease or recover from an injury or operation. Should they be stigmatised because some hospital or medical personnel made a terrible mistake? How does that make sense?

Then there are those who committed themselves to faithful monogamy, only to discover many years later that their spouse was not so committed. Having been unfaithful, the spouse then infects the faithful partner. Why should we stigmatise this man or woman, some of them very godly, church-going people? How would you justify such stigmatisation? Surely this is the supreme moment when they need their Christian brethren with whom they have worshipped for years to gather around them in loving compassion to help them through the greatest trial they ever thought they could face!

But what of those who have contracted the disease through sexual promiscuity – whether heterosexual or homosexual – or through use of unsanitary needles to shoot some illicit drug directly into the bloodstream? Don't they deserve to be stigmatised? This is where the probing challenge of Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter: "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone ... first." Here we confront God's written word at the personal level. God says of us: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁸ In this moment Jesus pointedly probes our responses to those people who do not fit our religious ideals and expectations.

Let's look again at this event recorded in John's Gospel. There are four sets of people involved. There are those in the crowd who stand by watching and there are always those who will stand on the sidelines as spectators without ever becoming involved. There are the self-righteous, hypocritical religious leaders who are sure of their interpretation of the Law of God and stand to condemn. We certainly have our fair share of those. There is the woman, exposed and shamed for all to see. Many of us can identify with her. And then there is Jesus. How does He respond?

May I suggest four things in the response of the King of Kings that we could ourselves embrace?

⁸ Romans 3:9-24, NKJV.

1. **His understanding.** Jesus understood. He understood the hypocrisy of the situation. The night before when Jesus was on the Mount of Olives, the Pharisees were scheming, plotting, and peeping through key holes. They then came to the Temple courtyard with a public pretense of great indignation. Jesus understood. He understood the young woman, exposed and shamed publicly by the hypocritical, self-righteousness of these key-hole-peeping, religious leaders. He understands it all well enough to avoid the extremes of naivety or cynicism.
2. **His compassion.** Jesus responded to the woman with compassion. He knew the woman's sin, her shame, but He also knew her potential. He saw a sheep without a shepherd, a sinner without a Saviour. Such love is inexplicable in human terms. As the old African-American preacher put it. "It's better felt than 'telt.'"
3. **His forgiveness.** Jesus extended forgiveness. Such forgiveness is not cheap. It would cost Jesus His life on the cross for true forgiveness is only extended because at the cross the terrible debt of sin was paid in full. Such forgiveness is painful, it is costly. Jesus reminded us that in forgiving others we secure forgiveness and in refusing to forgive we bring the unforgiveness of God upon ourselves.⁹ As one of the great contemporary hymns reminds us, "When He was on the cross I was on His mind."
4. **His challenge.** Jesus challenged this unnamed woman to a changed life. He says to her, "Go and sin no more." He confronts her behaviour, calling it what it is – sin. Then he confronts her will and challenges her to a changed lifestyle. Here is the reality of the transformational Christ in the midst of a sinful generation. The Christ we preach is the Christ of revolutionised lifestyles, the Christ of inner change that transforms outer actions, the Christ who changes behaviour at every level. We preach a revolution that refuses to accept the *status quo* but invokes the power of the risen Christ to break the bondage of sin and enable each and every person to make a one hundred and eighty degree turn so that they can have a transformed, a changed life! This for me is the crux of the whole event recorded in John's Gospel.

And this is where we in the Church diverge with some of the practitioners in the field who promote condoning and continuing sin as "tolerance." No, we **will not** support perpetuating the *status quo* of sin by licensing prostitutes as an article in today's newspaper once again recommends.

The Evangelical community deeply appreciates the stand taken by the Governments of Barbados, Antigua/Barbuda, and Guyana in repudiating the suggestion that prostitutes be licensed for Cricket World Cup 2007. It is also very encouraging to hear from Prime Minister Dr. Denzil Douglas that the Government of St. Kitts/Nevis "has no plan to decriminalise or to legalise commercial sex workers within or outside the context of World Cup Cricket 2007 ... and denounces any trafficking of humans for whatever purposes and also denounces violence against and exploitation of women."¹⁰

For us:

1. Prostitution exploits women and reinforces the male dominance of the woman in an obscene and unacceptable manner.
2. Decriminalisation of prostitution dignifies pimps, brothels, and sex clubs – something that is abhorrent to every Christian.
3. Decriminalisation actually aids the trafficking of women and children for sex purposes and as these exploited persons remain outside the legal framework, they are not in any way assisted by decriminalisation.
4. Decriminalisation does not in fact control prostitution, but expands it. There is an immediate and long-term increase in hidden, illegal, and street prostitution completely outside the legal framework.

⁹ Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁰ Letter dated September 26, 2006 from Dr. Denzil Douglas to Rev. Gerry Seale

5. Violence against women is an integral part of prostitution. Decriminalisation does not address this aspect of the “trade” and in fact increases the violence against those women who are forced into the so-called “profession.”
6. Women’s health is not in fact protected.
7. The Holy Bible is explicit in its opposition to prostitution.

We preach a Christ of revolutionary inner change, we preach a Christ who is compassionate, a Christ who gave His life on the cross and defeated death in the resurrection. We preach this Christ who is exceedingly abundantly able to break sin’s bondage, to change lives, to revolutionise circumstances. We preach a Christ who confronted the religious establishment of His day and shamed and confounded them. We preach a Christ who reached out to a young woman who had sinned, a young woman who had been publicly humiliated and stigmatised before the residents of Jerusalem where she lived, and offered her a radically new life. This is the Jesus we preach! This is the cause to which we are committed!

In this cause there is no room for the self-righteous and the hypocritical who stigmatise those who do not conform to their own religious expectations. Only hypocrites and bigots would stigmatise persons who are HIV+. There is room at the cross for the betrayed and the rebellious. There is even room at the cross for the bigot and the hypocrite. The power of the cross is not limited by man’s expectations or even imaginations. The power of the cross is pervasive, it exceeds every known limitation and surmounts every acknowledged obstacle. It breaks down stereotypes, dissolves bigotry, and destroys prejudices. It cleanses sin and changes the sinner. Don’t accept what others have said. Turn to the Man Christ Jesus and experience what He alone can do.

It is this Jesus who paid the price so that God in His word could say, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Embrace the gift. Experience the radicalness of this gift and allow God His opportunity to do a miracle.

May I close by reading from John 8:10-12, “He said to her, ‘Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.’ Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’ (NKJV).