

Transforming Eros
Lent 5, Year C
John 8: 1-11
21 March 2010

Stories about sexual intercourse and its aftermath are not common in the New Testament. What is more, even the most conservative critics agree that John didn't write the story we just heard. It was put in later because the early Church thought it was so good that they needed to slip it in somewhere as an authentic Jesus story.

But it is a puzzling tale for us, one more easily understandable for a traditional Middle Eastern Islamic society than our own. Our immediate reaction is – why wasn't the man brought along for punishment too – and – stoning an adulterer to death is way, way over the top – a Taliban militia kind of solution. Thank goodness we don't treat women like property any more, or have a double standard when it comes to sexual misconduct, or dish out such barbaric punishments. These smug thoughts might be our way of putting some distance between ourselves, and this tale of human passion and frailty.

What shapes our instinctive reaction to this story are certain recent developments in western culture. The sexual revolution, the introduction of no fault divorce laws, the easy acceptance of cohabitation and serial monogamy, and a widespread libertarian belief that sex is a value free activity. To us adultery is a regrettable reality, but nothing to get steamed up about.

My hunch is that most of us here enjoy living in a relaxed, tolerant, pluralist society where living a life of integrity in sexual matters is a positive choice,

and not something forced on you by punitive social conventions. For us the danger is that we will see the forgiveness of Jesus as cheap grace, easy compassion, a question of enlightened liberal tolerance in the midst of his limited, patriarchal contemporaries. Why then did Jesus say, “Go and sin no more?”

Sexual misconduct crops up in the New Testament in occasional references as Paul deals with outbreaks of unacceptable behaviour by new converts in the recently founded gentile churches. Having told them that they don't have to keep the Jewish law, with its high ethical standards, he now finds that all too often they go too far, and cheerfully lapse back into the easy pagan immorality they are used to. In addition to the inspiring message that the Holy Spirit is their new internal ethical compass, he now finds it necessary to spell out some basic ground rules – the dos and don'ts of responsible Christian sexual behaviour. What starts out as theology on the hoof to deal with emergency situations develops into a New Testament sexual holiness code. To be a Christian is apparently to behave in distinctively different ways to your non-believing neighbours when it comes to sexual relationships. Eventually the early church gets the message, and Christians stand out as objects of curiosity by their standards of sexual self-control.

When Christians get into the driver's seat of organised religion in the Roman Empire many of the brightest and the best become inspiring spiritual leaders in the triumphant church. But then a curious thing happens – the Christian elite falls in love with asceticism. That is to say, they come to believe that in order to make progress in the Christian life, if you want to become a serious

Christian, you must exercise considerable discipline over your bodily needs and your emotional desires. At its best this enthusiasm for asceticism was associated with the rise of monasticism, with its shrewd insights into a healthy rhythm of life that promotes peace with God. It also put the ideal of celibacy before the Christian community. This is a message we need to hear more of in the contemporary Christian Church. There are some people who are called by God to be single all their life as a way of living out the gospel, and as a means of being available for mission and ministry in contexts where married people would fear to operate.

But the love affair with asceticism also leads to some very odd results. For instance, if as a married person you were elected to become a bishop it was just fine to go on being married, provided that you promised to never have sex with your wife again. There was a message here about the body, and about marriage, that was not altogether helpful. The newly christianised masses of the Roman Empire drew a most interesting conclusion from all this. There is the A team over there who have renounced sex and marriage, and good on them, we admire them so much, but don't expect us to live like that, we wouldn't know how, and we don't want to. We, the B team will settle down to a second best life of muddle and compromise in matters of the flesh.

This background of a double standard in matters of sexual relating has not been helpful to the western church, as it has become embroiled in its current debates about human sexuality. What also blinds our vision in all of this is our current sell out to the siren call of sexual liberation from our surrounding culture. Some Christians have become persuaded of

the mistaken view that they have a God given and inalienable right to sexual fulfilment.

Why then did God invent desire? What does he want of us in our way of loving those we feel deeply drawn to? Why has he planted this trouble making yet deeply pleasurable source of relational energy in us?

One way of making sense of it all is to use the Greek distinction between the different kinds of love around in our world. There is agape, the selfless and unselfish love of others that seeks their best interests, without being concerned about what we can get out of it or them. There is philia, what you might call brotherly love, in which we do right by our family in the bonds of affection and loyalty to our kith and kin. Then there is eros, erotic love, that passionate, desiring love in which we ardently seek to unite ourselves to the beloved in an intense exchange of relational energy.

Some Christian thinkers write off Eros too lightly. When we come to close quarters with someone we like the feel, touch, taste and smell of, there is more going on than the obviously physiological, or at least there ought to be. God has implanted eros in us as a propellant that drives us out of ourselves to become involved in the lives of others. Without it we would be inclined to take the low risk option of keeping ourselves to ourselves. At its most extreme this leads us to become isolated and reclusive – as Greta Garbo famously said, “I just want to be alone.” If we have got any kind of psychological insight at all we will be aware that those whose company we find amusing or rewarding often subconsciously remind us of former loves, or of family members who were special to us, or of imagined objects of desire. These

dynamics play out in Christian congregations too. It is nothing to be afraid of, but is rather a gift to be accepted with amused self-knowledge.

But above all, eros is, as Hans Urs Von Balthasar put it, a love ascending. It is a relational propellant force that in the end isn't satisfied with a human lover, but comes to want more. It wants to rise above earthly loves to God. I find it interesting how some contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians use eros to describe the pattern of the believers wanting and thirsting for the Triune God. Let's remember that the Song of Songs in the Old Testament is a crucial text for Christian mystics and contemplatives.

Eros is a reminder to us, too, that Jesus Christ came to us in the flesh, to refashion our flesh that our destiny is to live in a risen body. There is no point in trying to become pure spirit, to pretend that we are anything other than enfleshed creatures, who experience the world through our senses.

But of course, eros can lead us on in to major trouble if we ignore God's rules for wise loving. One Christian writer put it well when he wrote that if we sleep with people we are not supposed to, then it is as though we are chained to that bed, trapped in that zone of carnality, curved in on ourselves in a place where human beings revert to being instinct driven, greedy animals. The trick for Christians to learn is how to use the advantages that our erotic energy brings in our relating to other people, while at the same time respecting the forbidden zones of relating that God spells out to us in the Scriptures. We are to be like a surfer who rides the waves of our erotic energy, using it to move us forward and

upwards, without letting it crash over us and ground us.

A few years ago there was a mass survey in Britain to try and find out the most popular poems. One of the top scorers was quite a surprise.

Alice Meynell was a 19th century catholic poet. In her teenage years a young Jesuit priest, who was charming, intelligent and good-looking, tutored her. There was obviously a powerful attraction between them, which they chose not to act on, but which left its mark on her. When they had gone their separate ways she wrote this poem about the experience. It is called "Renouncement."

I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,
I shun the love that lurks in all delight –
The love of thee – and in the blue heaven's height,
And in the dearest passage of a song.
Oh, just beyond the sweetest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet
bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.
But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away, -
With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
I run, I run, I am gather'd to thy heart.