

April 7, 2019 A Biblical Puzzle Homily:

“Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger” (Jn. 8:6)

“Again he bent down and wrote on the ground” (Jn.8:8)

In the last century, the twentieth, there were two rather remarkable and intriguing cases of unsolved mysteries that were, at the time, widely covered by the secular media. Amazingly, unanswered questions continue to persist after many years of fruitless inquiries. In 1937, the noted lady aviator Amelia Earhart disappeared after taking flight on a plane she piloted. Her body has never been recovered. Years later, in 1975, the former Head of the Teamsters’ union, Jimmy Hoffa, disappeared after he had fallen afoul of powerful mobsters. According to credible reports, he was likely killed in retaliation for his insubordination. To this day no one can say where he is buried. Dogged in their pursuit of the truth, conspiracy theorists have had a veritable field day offering oftentimes outlandish views of why the two notable Americans vanished.

Americans enjoy a good mystery on television. Some of you may be of an age to remember a question asked by the fans of a television soap opera, Dallas: “Who shot J.R. Ewing?” For nearly four months, the viewer awaited the answer! And this was only fiction!

In today’s gospel Jesus, while in the temple area in Jerusalem, saves an adulterous woman from certain death. His Passion and death loom. The adversaries of Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees, show little concern for a frightened woman whose life is in peril. They each have one objective in mind, namely, to discredit and destroy the good reputation of a Rabbi who has garnered much acclaim for his teaching and miracles. Clearly, he poses a distinct threat to them. The haunting words of the Psalmist come to mind: “Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin and plan treachery all day long”. (Ps.38:12) While his accusers are questioning him, Jesus bends down and begins writing with his finger in the ground. In the story told by the evangelist it is a crucial but, for whatever reason, unexplained detail. For many centuries people have wondered what Jesus wrote in the dust. It continues to be a mystery, an unresolved mystery. But that has not stopped scholars from speculating on what Jesus wrote on the ground with one of his fingers on one memorable, fateful day.

We are certainly led to believe that Jesus can read every heart and, in addition, is an impartial judge. In attempting to unravel the mystery of Christ’s action, we must now turn to the scholars who have weighed in on this puzzling mystery.

In one large group we are told it is futile to seek an answer to a question that has no possible solution. Christ may have been doodling, and his words have simply no bearing on the reported incident recorded in John’s gospel;

A second group is of the opinion that Christ may have written the sins of his accusers in the dust. Having lived longer, perhaps they were burdened with more sins! This may explain why the elders were the first to leave the scene of the dramatic encounter with Jesus and the condemned woman. (Jn.8:9)

St. Augustine, a doctor of the Church and one of history’s greatest minds, sees Christ portrayed as the Divine Legislator. The very law the scribes and Pharisees referred to... the Torah (Or Law of Moses), was given to him on Mount Sinai after it was inscribed into the stone tablets by the finger of God.

Another possible explanation is that Jesus may have been acting out symbolically the words of the prophet, Jeremiah about Israel’s sin in rejecting God. “Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth”. (Jer. 17:13)

Finally, scholars point out that the silence of Jesus may be telling. In this particular incident, Jesus is a man of few words. He makes an important point more by what he does rather than by what he says.

What do we think of Our Lord's puzzling action? What do we think he wrote in the dust?

What is our own attitude towards those who are guilty of grave sin? Are we more interested in condemnation or in a wrongdoer's redemption and rehabilitation?

Are we prone to rash judgment? Are we too quick to judge others? Is our harsh judgment based on flimsy evidence and wishful thinking? Are we gladdened by the misfortune of others?

In judging others, do we realize that we, too, are subject to God's judgment and are not free of sinful inclinations and actions?

Many wonderful artists of the past have captured on canvas this touching scene of reconciliation between Christ and the adulterous woman. But the most profound and pithy commentary comes from the pen of St. Augustine. He writes: "And two stand-alone... misery and mercy!"

Amen!