

In John's Gospel a woman is caught in adultery and condemned to death. In the Book of Daniel, Susanna is falsely accused by two men who seek to sexually exploit her. When she refuses to be blackmailed into adultery, they lie to cover their own treachery seeking to have her stoned to death. The Old Testament penalty gave equal treatment to men and women caught in adultery. "If a man is discovered lying with a woman who is married to another, they both shall die, the man who was lying with the woman as well as the woman. Thus, shall you purge the evil from Israel" (Dt 22:22).

Let's look at the stories one at a time. In the Gospel story, Jesus lays the foundation for the Sacrament of Penance by demonstrating mercy.¹ Jesus sees into the heart of the woman and sees that she is sorry. She is surprised by the mercy of Jesus for all the other men who judge her are ready to stone her to death. She mistakenly assumes that Jesus will condemn her as well. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (Jn 3:17). Jesus calls her to holiness and cautions her to sin no more.

Jesus did not come to condemn, but the scribes and Pharisees did. They brought the woman to Jesus not because they are interested in her but instead to trap Jesus. If Jesus says it is proper to stone her, they will find fault with him for showing no mercy. If Jesus shows mercy, they will condemn him for failure to follow the Mosaic Law. Just as Jesus reads the heart of the woman, he also reads the hearts of those who are trying to trap him. He knows their evil intent and challenges the man who is without sin to cast the first stone. Jesus responds with a thorough knowledge of the law. According to Deuteronomy, "The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised to put the person to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. Thus, shall you purge the evil from your midst" (Dt 7:7).

We also note in the Book of Deuteronomy that in difficult cases, the proper action is to seek the counsel of the Levitical priest or judge. "Anyone who acts presumptuously and does not obey the priest who officiates there in the ministry of the LORD, your God, or the judge, shall die. Thus, shall you purge the evil from Israel" (7:12). Jesus is the high priest, he is the just judge, and he has effectively told the scribes and Pharisees they are presumptuous and should they lift a stone against the woman, it will mean death for them. Borrowing from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus could have easily added: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mt 9:13).

Let us turn now to the story of Susanna and her false accusers. The two men who accused her were men of prominence. They assumed that their stature as elders and judges would shield them from any close scrutiny. Susanna refused to be blackmailed because she rightly understood that only God can justly condemn us. She would rather do what is right by God than to give into the exploitation of the men. She also calls upon and trusts in God to help her as her back is against the wall.

As in our Gospel story, God sees the wicked hearts of the two men. "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy" (Mt 15:18-19). Although the men did not physically commit adultery, in the eyes of God they are clearly guilty. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28).

Seeing the injustice, God sends Daniel to defend Susanna. Wisely, Daniel separates the men and proves their testimony is contradictory. One speaks of a small mastic tree, while the other tells of a majestic oak. The mortal punishment decreed by Daniel for the elders should be a sober lesson for us to always tell the truth and to recognize the mortal sin we fail to confess can have eternal consequences.

May we all exhibit the moral courage of Susanna to fear the Lord more than we fear those who seek to do us harm. May we all exhibit her faith and trust that God will help us in time of great need. May we all exhibit the wisdom and mercy of Jesus to sow seeds of justice in our troubled world.

¹ United States Catholic Catechism for Adults . United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Chapter 30.