

(English translation)

Rome, 25 february 1998

Word of Life

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ (Jn.8:7).

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, the Scribes and Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught in the act of committing adultery. They said to Jesus, ‘In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ (Jn. 8:5).

They wanted to set a trap for him. If Jesus had shown himself to be against the stoning, they could have accused him of going against the law. According to the law, the eye-witnesses had to begin stoning the one who had sinned, to be followed by the rest of the people. If, instead, Jesus had confirmed the death sentence, they would have made him contradict his own teaching about God’s mercy to sinners.

But Jesus, bending down and writing on the ground with his finger, showed how unruffled he was. He straightened up and said:

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

When they heard this, the accusers went away one by one, beginning with the eldest. Jesus then turned to the woman and asked, ‘Where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’ (see Jn. 8:10-11).

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

With these words, Jesus certainly doesn’t show himself as permissive in front of evil, such as adultery. His words: ‘Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’ clearly state God’s commandment.

Jesus wishes to unmask the hypocrisy of those who set themselves up as judges of a sister who has sinned, without recognizing that they too are sinners. Like this his words underline his famous declaration: ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make, you will be judged’ (Mt 7:1-2).

Speaking in this way, Jesus is addressing also those who totally condemn others, with no consideration of the penitence that can well up within the heart of the guilty. And he clearly shows how he treats those who fall: with mercy. When all had gone away from the woman taken in adultery, ‘Two were left,’ as Augustine of Hippo wrote, ‘misery and mercy.’¹

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

How can we put this word of life into practice?

Let’s remember, as we come before each brother or sister, that we too are sinners. We have all sinned and, even though it seems to us that we’ve not done anything seriously wrong, we have always to bear in mind that we may not realize the heavy circumstances that caused others fall so low, making them stray from God. How would we have done in their place?

We too, at times, have broken the bond of love that ought to unite us to God; we’ve not been faithful to him.

¹ Homilies on the Gospel of John 33:5.

If Jesus, the only man without sin, didn't throw the first stone at the adulteress, then neither can we at anyone whoever it may be.

And so, have mercy for all, react against those impulses that drive us to condemn without pity—we have to know how to forgive and forget. No harbouring in our hearts any lingering judgement or resentment, where anger and hatred can breed and alienate us from our brothers and sisters. See everyone as new.

Having in our hearts, rather than judgement and condemnation, love and mercy for each person, we will help each person begin a new life, we will constantly give courage to start afresh.

Chiara Lubich