

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Apr 7th 2014

The contrast between today's readings from Daniel and John show us clearly, I think, the kind of new order and new way of being that Jesus came into this world to inaugurate, one where we are called to mercy and compassion and where judgment and condemnation reside with God alone.

At issue in the first reading is whose behavior requires punishment. At first, Susanna is headed that way because of the conspiracy of the two elders who tried to force themselves on her. After the conspiracy was revealed, however, it was these two wicked elders who were punished with death. The basic idea: the veracity of the various claims was investigated and once guilt was established, punishment (in this case very severe punishment) was handed down.

How different is Jesus' approach in the gospel reading! He doesn't focus on whether the charge of adultery was true or not. He steers the elders away from judgment and condemnation and also refuses to issue any condemnation himself. He does not give the indication that anything goes or that there are no behaviors that we should consider sinful. In fact, he addresses the behavior by telling the woman not to sin anymore, but any judgment that might be warranted is presumably reserved for God. Those of us on the ground, going through the day to day ups and downs of life, are not asked to take on the role of deciding who is guilty and who is not.

All of us have probably heard (many times, most likely!) Pope Francis' now-famous quote, "Who am I to judge?" This quote came in the context of a question about homosexuality, which is not a topic I am speaking about here, but I think the idea is broadly applicable. It's very important to note that prior to this sound bite, Pope Francis said, "If they accept the Lord and have good will..." It seems to me that whether or not other people accept the Lord and have good will is often hidden from us, so I should not even try to judge. I am not at all comparing Pope Francis to Jesus or claiming that our current pontiff is going to turn the religious norms of the church on their head. I am saying, however, that Pope Francis' example can be a call and a reminder to us to return to the message and the attitude into which Jesus invited us and the world. We all need reminders every now and then, don't we?

We can't normally know what is on a person's heart and we certainly can't know the mind of God, so all that is left for us to do is treat others with compassion, forgiveness, and mercy, rather than judgment and condemnation. The rest is up to God.

Craig Zimmer