

Medicine of the Person

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Bible study 3

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(English translation: Kathy WEBB-PEPLOE)

The adulterous woman

(John 8, 1-11)

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?'

What have we here?

- A woman beyond the pale, in a society where unusual behaviour makes her an outsider... just like disease which excludes a person from an active and effective role within society, the same today as it has always been.
- And men of the law who come to question Jesus.

Is it only to put him to the test in an approach clearly designed to condemn him regardless of his answer?

Might it also be because, in some part, they are touched, troubled even by the words of this strange teacher who reconciles man with his limitations and that they feel themselves searched and called into question by a call, by behaviour that goes beyond all rules and laws?

The woman is there

- A thing, used by the scribes and Pharisees against Jesus;
- A thing, obviously despised: and what about the man whom she had been discovered with: why is he not there?
- The object of a 'challenge', maybe for a new paradigm; but that novelty threatens an order that is established if intangible

The question is posed...

Faced with this situation...should the rule of law be applied?

In medicine, we would say: apply best practice or evidence based medicine?

Does the woman have to be subject to a law resulting in death?

Should we invent or find another answer?

In spite of everything, wasn't it this that the 'decent' Pharisees expected or perceived subconsciously as they came to question Jesus?

You could imagine that others would have acted straight away.

But 'canny politicians' want to trap Jesus at all costs.

At that moment, Jesus doesn't yet know what solution to propose. Just like the doctor starting to take a history. What can you tell me about her.... what information can you give me?

By his silence and his crouched posture, Jesus interrogates their hearts...what are you really looking for as you ask me this question? He knows perfectly well that there is something else driving their behaviour towards him. He turns over in his mind the 'drop-down menu' at that time for best practice in this situation! But there is nothing more to say than the bare facts; she has been caught *in flagrante delicto*...Moses told us...as for you, what have you to say?

Jesus knows that the woman, the man, were born in order to live... he knows the solution proposed by the 'Jewish evidence based practice': intuitively, it doesn't suit him to comply, he who was sent to demonstrate the extravagant mercy of his Father. As he said: 'My yoke is easy to carry.' But.... how is he to reply!

'My yoke is easy to carry'...

How many times have we left someone in pain in the hospital because we judged that pain tolerable?... How many times has a woman been refused an epidural in labour because others claim not to be in pain?...

How often does the doctor, or the carer say that they know what is best for another person!

This absence of listening and lack of attention to patients' personal perception of their symptoms leads to bad prescribing and poorly respected management decisions.

Jesus analysed all the elements of this 'drop-down menu' designed by the expert scribes and teachers of the law. He has the answer to the problem on the page of 'good Jewish practice' on the computer; she must be stoned!!!

But we discover in Jesus' intuition...a rebellion, divine intuition, one might say 'genetic theocracy': the law is not absolute in itself, its deepest purpose is to uphold life. As for Him, he came that we might really have life. That is the difference from the men who interpret the 'will of God' in order to respect laws which are supposedly divine, whereas the only true 'law', absolutely divine, a law which Jesus carries within him, is love without limit for mankind!

He has a moment of silent rebellion...for 'in the genes' he carries, **he is** the love of God for mankind.

Jesus bends down, he allows himself to explore within himself what he has heard from the accusers, their real motivation which he discerns in them, alongside what he sees and what he guesses of the utter shame and visceral fear of the person at the centre of this...

When I was a medical student, a doctor said to me one day: 'When I have the impression of not having understood the question which the patient is asking themselves and which underlies the symptom for which they have come to see me, then I have the impression of not having done my work!..'

Jesus, who listens with the heart, 'hears' the heart... that of the Pharisees and the scribes, that of the woman and also that of his Father who has sent him on a mission: to be human, to wake the lost human, with the Holy Spirit, his Father, who is all Love...who makes of us brothers and sisters.

He bent down.... He let all these considerations churn around...but how was he to refuse a proposal which would destroy a human being and contradicted that extravagant Love of God for the man, the woman and his creation?

Is Jesus praying to his Father to change the hearts of these hardened men? Jesus sees beyond the legalism which has made them inhumane. Jesus is going to express his mercy, the divine mercy, both for the Pharisees and for the woman.

They want to test him, to trap him? Bent down, he doesn't set out to oppose them, to fight them. Jesus doesn't stand up to them. 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' He lets this saying hang in the air, not aggressively but inviting each person to see themselves as they are before him. In doing so, he takes a big risk; and if one of them was sufficiently dishonest to dare to say that he had never needed God's mercy, and set off the massacre by throwing the first stone?...

Jesus has the unconscionable audacity to take this risk...

Jesus found the right words to reconnect them to their own hearts: as good Jews, they know perfectly well that they are sinners and that, without mercy, they cannot live.

Jesus doesn't put himself in a position of power; God respects Mankind's liberty. For his opponents, he opens up an unexpected space to express their liberty while remaining true to themselves. Disconcerted, they have the honesty to acknowledge their hidden hypocrisy and take it into account; they let go of their prey.

As for the woman, he doesn't congratulate her! Of course, there is a better way than the law, but laws are not useless. 'Has no one condemned you? ... Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.'

With a humanity that is as simple as it is deep, Jesus doesn't take away hope from the hypocritical legalists with their arid hearts or from the unfaithful woman; and that opens for each of them a new hope. In fact, Jesus doesn't negate the law. He gives it meaning.

To reach out to another in the services designated as palliative care or supportive care, means knowing that a look, a hand placed on another's hand can be the ultimate treatment. It may not yet be part of all 'good practice' guidelines even if this approach is starting to be taught as part of training in palliative care.

When I was an intern in resuscitation, ethical committees didn't exist... a man was admitted to hospital after major surgery. He was 'alive' only because of cardio-pulmonary support. After consulting with the family and with the team, the consultant suggested that we choose a different path, when conventional care would have been to continue ventilation. After a night when the whole team prepared this gentleman so that he would be in the best possible condition, his ventilation was stopped so that he could be with his family in a room where family was not normally allowed. The only instruction was that he should be kept company until the moment of his death.

That left an impression on me for the rest of my career...

André Bertrand had made the humane choice contrary to best practice and to 'politically correct' thinking...

I later came to share his faith...

Jesus bends down, not because he is tired or frightened, but so that he doesn't appear in opposition to the others and certainly in order to allow everyone time to pause, to breathe...

By drawing on the ground, he is in some way performing a clinical examination of the situation...Between the guillotine blade of the law, which calls for condemnation of mankind, and the infinite love of God, his surprising gesture and his incisive words make us look deep within ourselves...

This time of reflection which Jesus shares with his Father; doesn't it make us think of those multi-disciplinary meetings allowing time for reflection and involving doctors, surgeons, clinical psychologists and carers, with the purpose of helping us all go beyond the easy judgement, the decision taken too rapidly ?

We can't take the parallel between this text and medical choice further, since the doctor will write a prescription whereas Jesus makes a prophetic response. 'the finger of God writes his law in our hearts.' (cf Jeremiah 31; 33, Ezekiel 36; 26-7)

This story reveals to us another particular phase in 21st century medicine. In the past, the doctor offered treatment and communicated his wisdom.

Here the scribes know the law but do not know how to apply it to a novel situation.

Nowadays, the effectiveness of treatments relies firstly on the patient following that therapeutic pathway. The patient becomes a collaborator in his treatment...

Jesus invites the woman to take herself in hand: 'Go!' he says. At a time when the hierarchy was such that only the 'wise' had any power, Jesus gives the power over life to a 'non-wise' person.

And that is how he operates. Did he ever heal anyone who hadn't asked to be healed, even if he had, sometimes to draw out of them that desire? Did he say: ' I heal you ' ...or instead 'Your faith has made you well'? He never acted as a benefactor who does not need the recipient to do anything... For him, for his Father, no human being is ever just a thing.

What a lesson!! From 2000 years ago!!!

Pierre Marès and a friend who is a priest, Jacques Teissier

Suggested reading :

- 'Qui donc est Dieu?...à la lecture de l'évangile de Jean' by Robert Pousseur and Jacques Teissier, Les Editions Ouvrières (1984)