

**Sermon preached at St Andrew's, Soham and St Laurence's, Wicken on Ash Wednesday 2017**  
**John 8:2-11**

Pope Francis describes sin as a wound. It is not just a black mark, a falling short, a missing of the target. Sin is more than that. It is a wound: the one who sins is wounded, those who are sinned against are wounded, and as a body we are wounded, when we fail to live as a community of people who are loved by God, loving each other and ourselves as God loves us. We are wounded when what we think, decide, do or don't do, is shaped by too little love.

For the woman in our gospel reading, the outward sign of her sin was obvious: she was caught in the act of adultery. But it wasn't the act that was sinful so much as the lack of love that it demonstrated: the failure to value herself and the person with whom she committed adultery; the lack of compassion for their respective partners; the missing respect for society's boundaries. The lack of love for each other and for themselves wounded each other and themselves, and the community.

When, I wonder, are the occasions when we have wounded ourselves, each other, and the wider body?

Wounds need to be acknowledged in order to be healed. It's easy to say "We all sin"; it's almost as easy to say "and that includes me" ... but how easy is it to acknowledge, and identify, and own, specifically how and when we have wounded ourselves and others? This is what's involved in confession. The woman in our gospel reading didn't deny her sin or point out that she wasn't the only guilty party. She recognised that she had wounded.

When, I wonder, have we allowed ourselves to acknowledge this?

Wounds need to be healed, and forgiveness plays a part in this. Forgiveness is a much misunderstood gift. Forgiveness is not about saying that the sin didn't matter: wounds do matter. It's not about taking away the consequences of sin: wounds do not vanish when the one who wounds is forgiven. And it's not about colluding with self-deception by denying the wounding that has taken place. Forgiveness doesn't deny the lack of love that has gone before. What forgiveness does do is set the person free to have another go at living as one who is loved. "Go your way", said Jesus to the woman. And this setting free opens the opportunity for healing to begin, for wounded relationships to be restored.

Tied in with confession and forgiveness and restoration is repentance. Having recognised our lack of love that has wounded, in repentance we demonstrate this by making a change, and forgiveness frees us to do this. "Go your way", said Jesus to the woman, "and from now on do not sin again". Have another go, and this time do it differently.

When, I wonder, have we known ourselves to be forgiven?

In a few moments we are coming to the part in our service which allows us to confess our wounding of ourselves, and each other, and the wider body through our lack of love. We will make some declarations about this, and will receive ashes on our foreheads as a sign of what we are acknowledging. Then as a sign of the restoration of wounded relationships we will share the Peace with each other, before coming together to the table in our restored relationship with God to meet with God in bread and wine. This isn't a one-time-only event: we can come back to God and repeat the process as often as we need. But today, and this season of Lent, gives us a special opportunity to do this. So let's make use of this occasion. There will be some quiet music which will play for a few minutes. Take this time to look at the next section of the service booklet, the Liturgy of Penitence, which is the formal confession that we will make of the ways in which we have demonstrated our lack of love. Take time to consider when what we think, decide, do or don't do has been shaped by too little love. Reflect on our wounding, and be ready for forgiveness, repentance and restoration.