

Archbishop Smith: The Alberta Windshield

Here in Alberta you'll find many vehicles with chipped and cracked windshields. The melting in spring of the snow that has long covered our roads leaves behind the dirt and small stones that had been spread on the pavement for winter traction. Car and truck tires pick up the rocks and hurl them out at great velocity. The chips and cracks that result are so common around here that we call the damaged pane of glass "the Alberta windshield". We grumble and complain a lot about this. On reflection, though, we are grateful that the windshield stops the stones. Hurling at great velocity, those rocks would cause terrible harm – even death – were they to hit a person.

Sunday's Gospel passage (John 8:1-11) was about stones about to be thrown at lethal velocity, not accidentally by vehicle tires but deliberately by human beings. Together with the other sacred texts (Isaiah 43: 16-21 and Philippians 3:8-14), it also tells of the shield that Jesus puts up to prevent any damage to persons.

The text from John is familiar. A woman is caught by scribes and Pharisees in the act of committing adultery, and then paraded out publicly before Jesus and the crowd in order to catch the Lord in a trap. The crowd is ready to hurl stones to kill the woman. Jesus raises a shield that does more than stop thrown stones; it prevents them from being launched in the first place. What Jesus puts up is the shield of truth, as he utters what is among the most famous lines in all of Sacred Scripture: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." The truth spoken here by the Lord is that there is no one who is without sin, and that, therefore, there is no one who can with any justification throw a stone of condemnation at another sinner.

In humility, we must acknowledge that we, too, have to hear this, we need this shield. All around us we see "stones" being thrown at others with alarming frequency and at mortal speed. Gossip is a pandemic, that spreads quickly and maliciously, especially through the agency of social media. Christians, too, need to be shielded against throwing rocks at others by presuming a degree of moral superiority over them. "Let anyone among you who is without sin ..."

As we ponder this Gospel passage in the light of the other texts, we can see that our good and loving God also puts up another shield to protect us from stones, this time those we hurl not at others but at ourselves. From the lips of Isaiah, we hear the Lord say this: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing..." The "new thing" that God promises to do is to re-create his people, to give them a new beginning, a fresh start, by the power of his forgiveness. This is a promise that he fulfilled in the paschal mystery of his Son, Jesus the Christ. Yet, we have a

tendency to hold on to our past, to remember again and again the sins we have committed. In so doing, we throw at ourselves the stones of self-recrimination. The shield that God puts up to guard against these projectiles is mercy.

God forgives in order to propel us into a future full of hope. He has no desire to leave us mired in the mud of guilt. Holding on in our minds to our past mistakes is an expression of the sin of pride, a refusal to accept the truth of God's liberating mercy. Acceptance of the full truth of God's mercy, which heals us totally, shields us from this sin. The example of St. Paul, who openly counts himself among the worst of sinners, is instructive here: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

We are grateful for the Alberta windshield. Even more – far more – are we thankful for the divine shields of truth and mercy that save us from throwing stones not only at our brothers and sisters but also at ourselves.