**John 8:1-11.**

Today marks the beginning of Lent, but as I sit writing these words, I can’t help feeling like the last twelve months have been one long lent, a period of waiting for something to happen, feeling powerless about a lot of the events I see around me and often feeling rather, well, helpless. Now helplessness is a truly awful thing, it drains us of our energy, it inflicts damage to our mental health and eventually can undermine our ability to function. If this persists for long enough, we can end up passive bystanders to life totally dependent on others for our future. In this case we can find ourselves putting everything on hold, looking forward to the vaccine, because of course when we all have the vaccine everything will be sorted won’t it?

Well, no, it won’t. You see the vaccine will just sort out the one problem of the virus, it has dominated so much of our thinking it is easy to forget just how broken the world was before it turned up. The virus is just a symptom of something bigger, something far, far worse. They are easy to see if look around us. We can point out the failings of our own and other governments, the greed of the banks, the corruption of big business, the pollution of our world by oil companies or destruction by industry, the way big business treats individuals as unimportant, how world trade exploits some countries for the profit of others, wars, terrorism and so on and so on.

But here is a terrible truth. The problem is not governments, banks, businesses, or companies.

None of these organisations are independent, self-aware creatures, they are just made up of lots of people, people like us. If a government behaves badly it is because of the people in it, if a business is greedy, it is the people in it, if an organisation is corrupt or polluting or destructive or uncaring, it is the people in it. We may not be part of one of these organisations, but they can only ever do it if we let them get away with it. To believe otherwise is to shift the blame, from people to organisations, it allows us to carry on doing the things which are wrong but point the finger at a faceless and soulless organisation.

Jesus points the finger in today’s passage at all those who have accused the woman of adultery, they are part the problem. Yes, she has committed adultery, but they are loving dragging her into the spotlight whilst clearly far less than perfect themselves, this is clear when they slink off under Jesus’ withering stare. It is also worth considering: where is the man, she is alleged to have committed adultery with? They do not seem so keen to pull him in front of Jesus. These individuals are clearly part of a patriarchal society, benefit from that and happy to see it remain subjugating individuals like this woman to make themselves feel more righteous. Jesus does not excuse her of course, but he doesn’t accuse her or judge her, he just tells her to stop and sets her free. Sin is funny, it always looks bigger when it’s manifest in others.

Therefore, today we mark ourselves with the sign of the cross! To acknowledge we are part of the problem, it resides in us. No organisation needs to repent of its sins and turn to Christ. We do.

But and this is important, this is not enough. Acknowledging the problem is not enough, it will not solve the world’s problems.

When we mark ourselves with the cross, we acknowledge something else, that as Christians we to are bearers of the cross, so we must also be part of the solution.

Ash Wednesday Marks the beginning of Lent, the period which comes before Jesus’s death and resurrection. It is generally a time when folks abstain from something by fasting. Now biblically fasting was a way of removing obstacles between oneself and God, centring one’s mind or being drawn back to the centrality of God in one’s life whilst turning away from sin. Why, so Christians might remember what they are called to both be but also do. Today however, fasting for Lent has become a bit of a cliché, so some people will give up cake or beer or sugar for example. Now I don’t wish to sound negative, but do we think God is that bothered if we give up cake for Lent to prepare for the period of Jesus death? Yes, of course it is not a bad thing to do, but in the sense of building God’s kingdom what have we achieved? And what have we declared to the world about our faith? ‘We take the death of Jesus so significant we have given up cake?’

This last twelve months have shone a spotlight on so much that is wrong in the world, it has shown us (if we need it), the inequality of our world: we have seen the way the virus has struck down the poorest and most marginalised in our country as a massively higher rate than those of us who are better off, we have seen those in care homes die at a terrible rate, domestic violence has sky rocket, foodbanks are stretched to capacity and we know that the economic devastation which is coming will hammer those on low and middle incomes far, far worse than those who are in the top 1%. The world is out of balance, socially, economically, and environmentally, in almost every sense. In the UK, we may have vaccinated fifteen million people but around the world there are countries who will have managed just a fraction of that, and they will probably be the poorest countries who are already devastated by disease and struggling with poor health care.

When we acknowledge our part in the woes of the world and we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross, this is not the end for us as Christians, this must be the beginning. As bearers of the cross, we carry a special responsibility to stand against the evils in the world. This sounds like a massive burden to carry, but it can also be liberating. This last year has left us feeling helpless, but the truth is we are not. When we commit to bear the cross, we also acknowledge we can make a difference. We are not helpless:

In the big picture: if we are unhappy with politicians, we have a vote; if we are unhappy with the way a company does business our money and where we spend it is powerful:

And right here where we live:

We can spend time with the lonely.

We can listen to the unheard.

Lift the fallen.

Bandage the hurt

Feed the hungry.

And you know what, when we do it helps us see a path forward in times of wilderness, as we seek to walk in Jesus’ footsteps.

We have marked our foreheads with the sign of the cross now let us commit to spending Lent thinking how we can practically become instruments of the cross as agents of love, as agents of forgiveness and, as agents of change.