

Gospel, 5th Sunday of Lent C

[Jn 8:1-11](#)

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area,
and all the people started coming to him,
and he sat down and taught them.
Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman
who had been caught in adultery
and made her stand in the middle.
They said to him,
“Teacher, this woman was caught
in the very act of committing adultery.
Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women.
So what do you say?”
They said this to test him,
so that they could have some charge to bring against him.
Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger.
But when they continued asking him,
he straightened up and said to them,
“Let the one among you who is without sin
be the first to throw a stone at her.”
Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.
And in response, they went away one by one,
beginning with the elders.
So he was left alone with the woman before him.
Then Jesus straightened up and said to her,
“Woman, where are they?
Has no one condemned you?”
She replied, “No one, sir.”
Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you.
Go, and from now on do not sin any more.”

Jerome Biblical Commentary

THE STORY OF THE ADULTERESS (7:53-8:11). This and the following section (108) treat of an episode of Gospel tradition that is non-Johannine and interpolated.

There seems to be no doubt that this passage, which interrupts the sequence of the Tabernacle discourses, did not originally form part of Jn's Gospel. It is omitted by P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵, and all the major

codices except D; it is also lacking in many of the Gk cursives of Jn, sometimes put by them at the end of the Gospel or after Lk 21:38. It was unknown to the Gk Fathers and commentators before the 12th cent. and is not found in most of the ancient versions. However, it is well attested by the Latin Fathers and was included in the VL and Vg. The inspired character and historical worth of the story are not to be called into question, but it doubtless is not the work of John. Its style is that of the Syn, especially of Lk, and most likely belonged to that Gospel originally. Various reasons have been suggested for its presence here in the “received text.” Perhaps the most reasonable explanation is that it was transferred here to illustrate the Lord’s statement in 8:15, in the following discourse.

108 **53.** *then each went to his own house:* The original context is unknown, but it seems that the Syn account of passion week is presupposed, according to which Jesus spent the days in Jerusalem teaching but left the city each night for safety (cf. Mk 11:11; etc.).**8:1-2.** A close correspondence to what is supposed here can be found in Lk 21:37f.**3-6a.** The episode that follows accords with the pattern made familiar by the Syn. Jesus’ legalistic foes deliberately try to trap him by presenting a difficult problem. Whatever solution he gives will work to his disadvantage (cf. Mt 22:15-22; Mk 10:2ff.). What Jesus is being asked to pronounce on here is not precisely clear. Dt 22:23f. decreed stoning for a betrothed virgin who had committed adultery, but for an adulterous wife Lv 20:10 and Dt 22:22 prescribed death without specifying the manner of execution. The rabbis commonly interpreted the penalty in such undetermined cases to be strangling rather than stoning. Perhaps Jesus was being asked to decide on the validity of such an interpretation (see also comment on 18:31).**6b.** This is the only passage in the Gospels in which Jesus is said to have written anything (kategraphen), consequently it has always occasioned much speculation. Probably the author meant no more than that Jesus idly traced figures on the ground to indicate his disinterest in the proceedings.**7-8.** Characteristically, Jesus refuses to deal with the case as a merely legal matter, but treats it practically. In a capital case, the witnesses against the accused were to take the initiative in carrying out the execution (Dt 17:7). Jesus asks them to think first whether their own conscience proclaims them worthy to sit in judgment.**9-10.** Realizing the effectiveness of Jesus’ answer and perhaps being ashamed of having tried to use the woman’s humiliation as a means of ensnaring a man, the scribes and Pharisees depart, led by their elders.**11.** The lesson of the story is, of course, not that sin is of no importance, nor that God does not punish sin, but that God extends mercy to the sinner that he may turn from his sin. The picture of the sinner and the Sinless standing face to face exemplifies the call to repentance. Thus, though Jesus himself does not judge (8:15), it is nevertheless for judgment that he has come into the world (9:39).

Gk Greek

VL *Vetus latina* (pre-Vulgate Old Latin version of the Bible)

Syn Synoptic Gospels *or* Synoptic writers

Haydock's Biblical Commentary

Ver. 1, &c.[1] The last verse of the foregoing chapter, and the eleven verses that follow in this, are not found in the greater part of our present Greek copies, yet they are in some manuscripts and so are retained in the Protestant translation. We read nothing of them in the commentaries of St. Chrysostom or St. Cyril; but St. Jerome (lib. ii. con. Pelag. tom. 4, part 2, p. 521. Ed. Ben.) says, they were found in many both Latin and Greek copies. St. Ambrose (Ep. 52.) says this passage, of the woman taken in adultery, was always famous in the Church. St. Augustine expounds them, tract. in Joan, &c. (Witham)

Ver. 6. *Wrote with his finger*, as one that was musing about something else. (Witham)

Ver. 7. We cannot with any propriety reprehend or condemn faults in others, if we ourselves be guilty of the same, or other great faults, St. Cyril, in Joan. --- See annotations on Matthew vii, ver. 1.

Ver. 9. *Went out one by one*,[2] confounded, and as it is in the ordinary Greek copies, convicted by their own conscience. (Witham)

Ver. 11. Hence we may see how impious is the doctrine of those who say that God is the author of sin. Christ did not say to the woman: I do not condemn thy sin; or, go and live now as thou pleasest, I will free thee from all punishment due to any sin thou shalt commit: but he only said, *Go, and from henceforth sin no more*: thus preserving his amiable virtue of clemency, and still not encouraging vice. (St. Augustine)

Daily Study Bible Series, The Gospel of John, Volume 2 (non-Catholic)

THE scribes and Pharisees were out to get some charge on which they could discredit Jesus; and here they thought they had impaled him inescapably on the horns of a dilemma. When a difficult legal question arose, the natural and routine thing was to take it to a Rabbi for a decision. So the scribes and Pharisees approached Jesus as a Rabbi with a woman taken in adultery.

In the eyes of the Jewish law adultery was a serious crime. The Rabbis said: "Every Jew must die before he will commit idolatry, murder or adultery." Adultery was, in fact one of the three gravest sins and it was punishable by death, although there were certain differences in respect of the way in which the death penalty was to be carried out. Leviticus 20:10 lays it down: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." There the method of death is not specified. Deuteronomy 22:13–24 lays down the penalty in the case of a girl who is already betrothed. In a case like that she and the man who seduced her are to be brought outside the city gates, "and you shall stone them to death with stones." The *Mishnah*, that is, the Jewish codified law, states that the penalty for adultery is strangulation, and even the method of strangulation is laid down. "The man is to be enclosed in

ding up to his knees, and a soft towel set within a rough towel is to be placed around his neck (in order that no mark may be made, for the punishment is God's punishment). Then one man draws in one direction and another in the other direction, until he be dead." The *Mishnah* reiterates that death by stoning is the penalty for a girl who is betrothed and who then commits adultery. From the purely legal point of view the scribes and Pharisees were perfectly correct. This woman was liable to death by stoning.

The dilemma into which they sought to put Jesus was this. If he said that the woman ought to be stoned to death, two things followed. First, he would lose the name he had gained for love and for mercy and never again would be called the friend of sinners. Second, he would come into collision with the Roman law, for the Jews had no power to pass or carry out the death sentence on anyone. If he said that the woman should be pardoned, it could immediately be said that he was teaching men to break the law of Moses, and that he was condoning and even encouraging people to commit adultery. That was the trap in which the scribes and Pharisees sought to entrap Jesus. But he turned their attack in such a way that it recoiled against themselves.

At first Jesus stooped down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Why did he do that? There may be four possible reasons.

(i) He may quite simply have wished to gain time and not be rushed into a decision. In that brief moment he may have been both thinking the thing out and taking it to God.

(ii) Certain manuscripts add, "As though he did not hear them." Jesus may well have deliberately forced the scribes and Pharisees to repeat their charges, so that, in repeating them, they might possibly realize the sadistic cruelty which lay behind them.

(iii) Seeley in *Ecce Homo* makes an interesting suggestion. "Jesus was seized with an intolerable sense of shame. He could not meet the eye of the crowd, or of the accusers, and perhaps at that moment least of all of the woman. . . . In his burning embarrassment and confusion he stooped down so as to hide his face, and began writing with his fingers upon the ground." It may well be that the leering, lustful look on the faces of the scribes and Pharisees, the bleak cruelty in their eyes, the prurient curiosity of the crowd, the shame of the woman, all combined to twist the very heart of Jesus in agony and pity, so that he hid his eyes.

(iv) By far the most interesting suggestion emerges from certain of the later manuscripts. The Armenian translates the passage this way: "He himself, bowing his head, was writing with his finger on the earth to declare their sins; and they were seeing their several sins on the stones." The suggestion is that Jesus was writing in the dust the sins of the very men who were accusing the woman. There may be something in that. The normal Greek word for *to write* is *graphein*; but here the word used is *katagraphein*, which can mean *to write down a record against someone*. (One of the meanings of *Kata* is *against*). So in Job 13:26 Job says: "Thou writest (katagraphein) bitter things against me." It may be that Jesus was confronting those self-confident sadists with the record of their own sins.

However that may be, the scribes and Pharisees continued to insist on an answer—and they got it. Jesus said in effect: “All right! Stone her! But let the man that is without sin be the first to cast a stone.” It may well be that the word for *without sin* (anamart tos) means not only *without sin*, but even *without a sinful desire*. Jesus was saying: “Yes, you may stone her—but only if you never wanted to do the same thing yourselves.” There was a silence—and then slowly the accusers drifted away.

So Jesus and the woman were left alone. As Augustine put it: “There remained a great misery (*miseria*) and a great pity (*misericordia*).” Jesus said to the woman: “Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. Jesus said: “I am not for the moment going to pass judgment on you either. Go, and make a new start, and don’t sin any more.”

WRETCHEDNESS AND PITY

THIS passage shows us two things about the attitude of the scribes and the Pharisees.

(i) It shows us their *conception of authority*. The scribes and the Pharisees were the legal experts of the day; to them problems were taken for decision. It is clear that to them authority was characteristically critical, censorious and condemnatory. That authority should be based on sympathy, that its aim should be to reclaim the criminal and the sinner, never entered their heads. They conceived of their function as giving them the right to stand over others like grim invigilators, to watch for every mistake and every deviation from the law, and to descend on them with savage and unforgiving punishment; they never dreamed that it might lay upon them the obligation to cure the wrongdoer.

There are still those who regard a position of authority as giving them the right to condemn and the duty to punish. They think that such authority as they have has given them the right to be moral watch-dogs trained to tear the sinner to pieces; but all true authority is founded on sympathy. When George Whitefield saw the criminal on the way to the gallows, he uttered the famous sentence: “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

The first duty of authority is to try to understand the force of the temptations which drove the sinner to sin and the seductiveness of the circumstances in which sin became so attractive. No man can pass judgment on another unless he at least tries to understand what the other has come through. The second duty of authority is to seek to reclaim the wrongdoer. Any authority which is solely concerned with punishment is wrong; any authority, which, in its exercise, drives a wrongdoer either to despair or to resentment, is a failure. The function of authority is not to banish the sinner from all decent society, still less to wipe him out; it is to make him into a good man. The man set in authority must be like a wise physician; his one desire must be to heal.

(ii) This incident shows vividly and cruelly *the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees to people*. They were not looking on this woman as a person at all; they were looking on her only as a thing, an instrument whereby they could formulate a charge against Jesus. They were using her, as a man might use a tool, for their own purposes. To them she had no name, no personality, no feelings; she was simply a pawn in the game whereby they sought to destroy Jesus.

It is always wrong to regard people as things; it is always unchristian to regard people as cases. It was said of Beatrice Webb, afterwards Lady Passfield, the famous economist, that “she saw men as specimens walking.” Dr Paul Tournier in *A Doctor’s Casebook* talks of what he calls “the personalism of the Bible.” He points out how fond the Bible is of names. God says to Moses: “I know you by name” (Exodus 33:17). God said to Cyrus; “It is I, the God of Israel, who call you by your name” (Isaiah 45:3). There are whole pages of names in the Bible. Dr Tournier insists that this is proof that the Bible thinks of people first and foremost, not as fractions of the mass, or abstractions, or ideas, or cases, but as persons. “The proper name,” Dr Tournier writes, “is the symbol of the person. If I forget my patients’ names, if I say to myself, ‘Ah! There’s that gall-bladder type or that consumptive that I saw the other day,’ I am interesting myself more in their gall-bladders or in their lungs than in themselves as persons.” He insists that a patient must be always a person, and never a case.

It is extremely unlikely that the scribes and the Pharisees even knew this woman’s name. To them she was nothing but a case of shameless adultery that could now be used as an instrument to suit their purposes. The minute people become things the spirit of Christianity is dead.

God uses his authority to love men into goodness; to God no person ever becomes a thing. We must use such authority as we have always to understand and always at least to try to mend the person who has made the mistake; and we will never even begin to do that unless we remember that every man and woman is a person, not a thing.

WRETCHEDNESS AND PITY

FURTHER, this incident tells us a great deal about Jesus and his attitude to the sinner.

(i) It was a first principle of Jesus that only the man who himself is without fault has the right to express judgment on the fault of others. “Judge not,” said Jesus, “that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). He said that the man who attempted to judge his brother was like a man with a plank in his own eye trying to take a speck of dust out of someone else’s eye (Matthew 7:3–5). One of the commonest faults in life is that so many of us demand standards from others that we never even try to meet ourselves; and so many of us condemn faults in others which are glaringly obvious in our own lives. The qualification for judging is not knowledge—we all possess that; it is achievement in goodness—none of us is perfect there. The very facts of the human situation mean that only God has the right to judge, for the simple reason that no man is good enough to judge any other.

(ii) It was also a first principle with Jesus that our first emotion towards anyone who has made a mistake should be pity. It has been said that the duty of the doctor is “sometimes to heal, often to afford relief and always to bring consolation.” When a person suffering from some ailment is brought to a doctor, he does not regard him with loathing even if he is suffering from a loathsome disease. In fact the physical revulsion which is sometimes inevitable is swallowed up by the great desire to help and to heal. When we are confronted with someone who has made a mistake, our first feeling ought to be, not, “I’ll have nothing more to do with someone who could act like that,” but, “What can I do to help? What can I do to undo the consequences of this

mistake?" Quite simply, we must always extend to others the same compassionate pity we would wish to be extended to ourselves if we were involved in a like situation.

(iii) It is very important that we should understand just how Jesus did treat this woman. It is easy to draw the wrong lesson altogether and to gain the impression that Jesus forgave lightly and easily, as if the sin did not matter. What he said was: "I am not going to condemn you just now; *go, and sin no more.*" In effect what he was doing was not to abandon judgment and say, "Don't worry; it's quite all right." What he did was, as it were, *to defer sentence.* He said, "I am not going to pass a final judgment *now*; go and prove that you can do better. You have sinned; go and sin no more and I'll help you all the time. At the end of the day we will see how you have lived." Jesus's attitude to the sinner involved a number of things.

(a) It involved *the second chance.* It is as if Jesus said to the woman: "I know you have made a mess of things; but life is not finished yet; I am giving you another chance, the chance to redeem yourself." Someone has written the lines:

"How I wish that there was some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never put on again."

In Jesus there is the gospel of the second chance. He was always intensely interested, not only in what a person had been, but also in what a person could be. He did not say that what they had done did not matter; broken laws and broken hearts always matter; but he was sure that every man has a future as well as a past.

(b) It involved *pity.* The basic difference between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees was that they wished to condemn; he wished to forgive. If we read between the lines of this story it is quite clear that they wished to stone this woman to death and were going to take pleasure in doing so. They knew the thrill of exercising the power to condemn; Jesus knew the thrill of exercising the power to forgive. Jesus regarded the sinner with pity born of love; the scribes and Pharisees regarded him with disgust born of self-righteousness.

(c) It involved *challenge.* Jesus confronted this woman with the challenge of the sinless life. He did not say: "It's all right; don't worry; just go on as you are doing." He said: "It's all wrong; go out and fight; change your life from top to bottom; go, and sin no more." Here was no easy forgiveness; here was a challenge which pointed a sinner to heights of goodness of which she had never dreamed. Jesus confronts the bad life with the challenge of the good.

(d) It involved *belief in human nature*. When we come to think of it, it is a staggering thing that Jesus should say to a woman of loose morals: “Go, and sin no more.” The amazing, heart-uplifting thing about him was his belief in men and women. When he was confronted with someone who had gone wrong, he did not say: “You are a wretched and a hopeless creature.” He said: “Go, and sin no more.” He believed that with his help the sinner has it in him to become the saint. His method was not to blast men with the knowledge—which they already possessed—that they were miserable sinners, but to inspire them with the unglimped discovery that they were potential saints.

(e) It involved *warning*, clearly unspoken but implied. Here we are face to face with the eternal choice. Jesus confronted the woman with a choice that day—either to go back to her old ways or to reach out to the new way with him. This story is unfinished, for every life is unfinished until it stands before God.