

If you want to see with your own eyes what a woman being stoned for adultery looks like, then watch the scene after the opening credits of 'Murder On The Orient Express,' with David Suchet as Hercule Poirot.

In fact, watch it in its entirety, as it vividly illustrates Jesus' words to the Scribes and the Pharisees: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." Jn. 8: 7

We don't have two hours to spare, or the facilities to watch the DVD, so I'll try to open up this passage to you in the few minutes we have.

Let's begin with that strange scene where Jesus, with this woman standing before Him about to face a horrible death: "Bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger." Jn. 8: 6 John doesn't tell us what Jesus wrote; but, as the Scribes and Pharisees knew the Scriptures back to front, but with their heads, not their hearts, I think Jesus may have written these words from the Prophet Jeremiah: "[Your] sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of [your] hearts. Those who turn away from [the Lord] will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water." Jer. 17: 1 & 13

In today's reading from Isaiah, the Lord says: "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." Is. 43: 19 God providing living water surrounds today's Gospel, and brings us to the context of this woman being brought to Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles.

This Feast recalled Moses, and the People of God dwelling in tabernacles – tents - in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land.

But by Jesus' time it had become linked with the Lord coming decisively and definitively to redeem His people, and set them free.

To tabernacle; to pitch His tent among them; to dwell among them.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jn. 1: 14

On the seventh, and last day of the Feast, the Temple priests would pour water over the altar as a sign that – one day - the Messiah would appear there, and provide: "Streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen." Is. 43: 20 as Isaiah wrote.

Not physical water, but that which cleanses and refreshes us in our innermost being.

Jesus is that: "Living water." Jn. 4: 10 The living water that: "Becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within [us], giving [us] eternal life." Jn. 4: 14

And this leads us to the Prophet Zechariah, where he says of the Messiah coming at the Feast of Tabernacles: "On that day a fountain will be opened to cleanse them from sin and impurity."

Zech. 13: 1

And, on the day before His encounter with the woman; on that seventh day of the Feast: "Jesus stood [in the Temple] and shouted to the crowds, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

Jn. 7: 37 – 39

So the Messiah has appeared in the Temple as Scripture promised; but, instead of receiving Him, the Chief Priests, the Pharisees, and the people want to seize hold of Jesus and kill Him.

And so, by the next day, when Jesus returns to the Temple a darker tone has come into the Gospel, because He realises His people are wilfully misunderstanding Him, failing to grasp what He's offering them, and wanting to kill Him because they have: "Hearts of stone." Ezek. 36: 26

And into this dark scene come the religious leaders with a woman they've caught in the very act of adultery, which in their law meant she had to be stoned to death.

There's no doubt they're cynically using, and manipulating her for their own ends so that they can trap Jesus because, in their eyes, He wasn't faithful to the religious law.

Along with Paul, before he became a Christian, they would boast: "As far as keeping the Law is concerned, I kept it perfectly." Phil. 3: 6

But, unlike Paul, they remain chained in their own self-righteous bigotry: whereas he opened up his heart to Jesus, and could then say: "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." Phil. 3: 8 – 9

What this encounter doesn't mean, as some have tried to twist it to mean, that adultery, and other sins, don't matter.

Jesus is going far deeper than that.

He asks those who've brought the woman to Him to look into their own hearts and lives and, if they've never sinned, then they can start throwing rocks at her.

One by one they slink away.

Then: "Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'" Jn. 8: 10 – 11

Those last words of Jesus to the woman are extremely important.

If she's been forgiven; if she's been rescued from imminent death, she must live by that forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't the same thing as tolerance; and being forgiven by Jesus doesn't mean that sin doesn't matter.

Forgiveness actually means that sin does matter, but that God's choosing to take it off our shoulders to lay it upon Jesus.

"The Lord laid upon him the sin of us all." Is. 53: 6 because He is: "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jn. 1: 29

After the woman has left Jesus – forgiven, cleansed, and healed – He tries to continue teaching His people.

But they don't want to know, so they: "Picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds." Jn. 8: 59

That's because His 'hour' had not yet come.

That 'hour' would come when He's lifted up from the earth, the water and blood flows from His side as a healing stream; and, with His last breath, He breathes His Spirit upon all peoples.

Our sin has pierced Jesus to the heart; but from His heart flows a healing stream of grace, to cleanse us, and give us new life.

As we set out on the final stage of the journey to the Cross this Easter, let's rest in the Heart of Jesus, and make these words of Paul our own prayer: "I want to know Christ better. I want to know the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings. I want to become like him by sharing in his death. Then by God's grace I will rise from the dead."

Phil. 3: 10 – 11