

The Woman Taken in Adultery
Lent 5 Year C
John 8:1-11

The story of the woman taken in adultery is among the best known of all the Bible's tales. Despite the ever decreasing scriptural knowledge of the world around us, the phrase "to cast the first stone" remains in frequent use, and most people even know to what it refers. But there are a few interesting things about this story which you probably didn't know, and it does no harm to consider them this morning.

The first is that the story doesn't actually belong in John's gospel. It is written in a style rather different from the rest of that book, it uses phrases unknown elsewhere in John – the familiar words "scribes and Pharisees" don't actually appear anywhere else in that gospel, and most importantly, it is omitted from the earliest manuscript authorities. If you were to look it up in a contemporary critical commentary, you would probably find it in an appendix, because wherever it comes from, it doesn't come from John. In fact, one early set of manuscripts places it towards the end of Luke's gospel, and there are stylistic features which make it seem more like Luke than anything else. But in all likelihood it does not come from the pen of any of the evangelists, but is a second century addition to the gospels.

What does this tell us? Most importantly, it tells us that an historical understanding of the Bible only gives us part of what we need to interpret it. Should we remove this story from John because it wasn't there originally? Of course not. It is as much a part of Christian scripture as anything else. The Bible is what the church says it is, without the authority of canon given by the teaching, practice and councils of the church, the texts of scripture would be just like any others. But they are not, they are the Bible, and the Bible is the church's book.

The second interesting thing to consider about this story stems from a single word. When those who would stone the woman hear Jesus's words, they drift away, one by one, starting with the eldest. That use of eldest – the presbyteroi – reminds us of some other elders, the two wicked judges who seek to seduce the beautiful Susanna in the chapters at the end of the Book of Daniel which are deuterocanonical, or part of the apocrypha. Threatening to swear that they have seen Susanna with a young lover, they try to force her into giving way, but she – determined to keep her honour – refuses. When the young Daniel comes to judge the case he exposes the lies of the elders and demonstrates that not only is Susanna not guilty of adultery, but the two so called judges, the elders of the people, are themselves thoroughly corrupt.

Here in our gospel reading we have a woman accused of adultery, and a young man who judges the case surprisingly. When his judgement is given – let him who is without sin cast the first stone – they realise that their case is useless, and it is the elders who are first to disappear. The evangelist – whoever he is – wants us to think of the innocent Susanna.

But there is another Old Testament reference, one rather harder to spot, in this little story. Both before and after Jesus pronounces on the situation, he bends down and writes in the dust of the ground. Some have tried to see in this a legal ceremony, the writing down of judgement before it is pronounced in a Roman law court. But the first place to look is always the Bible itself. In the seventeenth chapter of the prophet Jeremiah we find these words: “O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake thee shall be put to shame; those who turn away from thee shall be written in the earth”. It is impossible for us to imagine the extent to which the Hebrew scriptures would have been fixtures of the memories of Jesus and his hearers. Writing in the earth is not just an allusion to this verse from Jeremiah, it is a statement to those watching – people who could not have seen someone writing in the earth without thinking of that scriptural passage. All who turn away from God are written in the dust. First of all, the individual who is accused – the charge is made, the challenge is put, and Jesus writes in the dust. But then, after he makes his own challenge to cast the first stone, everyone is

the subject of the writing: all have sinned, all have turned away, all are written in the dust.

These details do, I think, help us to understand this story. But they are hardly necessary. Indeed, this sermon is hardly necessary. I can think of very few passages in the gospels which are clearer, very few which speak to us so directly, which make a necessary point so directly and so unavoidably. Strange, isn't it, that we can spend so much time worrying about the finer points and ignoring the whole. There is very little else to say about this story than hear it, remember it, act upon it. Do not judge. Do not condemn. It really is as simple as that.

When all have drifted away, all those who are not without sin, Jesus tells the woman to go, and not to sin again. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard people using that end of the story to stress that it is really about the need to avoid sin. No it is not. It is about the need to avoid judging. It is about the unconditional, the uncomfortable, loving forgiveness of God, something which mocks our rules and regulations, our moral sense, our individual pride, our certainty that we know what is right and what is wrong. The only one who is fit to judge is the one who is without sin – all the others disappear, and the woman is left with that sinless one, the one who might, after all, be entitled to condemn. But does he? No he does not. Neither should we. That's all. Go and do it.