**Passion Sunday, 2025**

This week, it’s the woman caught in adultery. I often talk about the imagination of God: for me, this is a story all about God’s imagination. What do I mean?

Some context: it’s a trap. Jesus has been hanging around with *those* people, “tax-collectors and sinners,” and that’s been getting the Pharisees’ backs up, especially because He suggests that their righteousness is not all it’s cracked up to be. They’ve tried to trap Him before, with questions about the Law, and now they’re trying something more direct.

Here’s the trap. They say: “this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.” *And* they say: “In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women.” And *then* they ask, “So what do *you* say?” Gotcha.

Gotcha, because in their minds, there’s no way out: the adulterous woman – the poor thing doesn’t even get a name – is precisely the sort of low-life that Jesus seems to champion, but she is undeniably guilty. Some people try to argue that she isn’t, but the story as told doesn’t make a great deal of sense if so. Jesus, note you, doesn’t dispute her guilt. And the punishment in the Law is indeed stoning.

They’re inviting Jesus to choose between His love for sinners and His reverence for the Law, and they think that, whichever He chooses, they’ve got Him. If He spares the woman, they can say He’s not a real, law-abiding Jew; notice how they’re very careful to use Moses’ name. And if He condemns her to be stoned, well, there goes His credit with the ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ who follow Him.

In fact He chooses neither, because He is more imaginative than they give Him credit for. First He writes – or draws, same word in Greek – on the ground. We’re not told *what* He writes, but it’s an eloquent gesture, to ignore this barbaric attempt to use the life of this unfortunate sinner to settle a theological dispute. And by lowering Himself to the ground, isn’t He signalling His refusal to stand over this woman in judgement, as her accusers are?

They press their point, though, and eventually He *does* respond, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” Imaginative, and from one point of view, somewhat unfair, no? No criminal justice system can function if only the sinless are allowed to be judges, with no offense meant to any members of the senior profession who may be present. Some people, from this passage, imagine that it is wrong to punish the guilty *at all*, or even that Jesus is implying that sin doesn’t matter a bit (‘and so I don’t have to go to confession, do I Father?’)

But something else is going on here: the Pharisees aren’t interested in this woman as a matter of criminal justice: they’re talking in terms of theological justice. Jesus has been teaching – by His words and His actions – that God’s mercy extends, *through Him*, even to those outside the boundaries of the Law. They’re asking Him to choose between justice and mercy, but *theological* justice and mercy, rather than criminal justice and legal clemency. And He chooses both, with divine imagination.

He can do that, because He *is* the one among them without sin. He *is* the Legislator, the Lawgiver. All that writing on the ground with His finger, is that not powerful reminiscent of the Finger of God writing the commandment on the tables of stone on Mt. Sinai? It is for *him* to judge this woman, as He chooses. “Neither do I condemn you.” And for heaven’s sake let’s remember the next bit “Go, and from now on sin no more.”

All well and good, but – you were expecting this – there’s another way to read this passage, springing from that idea that Jesus, as the giver of the Law, is not *bound* by the Law. In the adulterous woman, *all* humanity is indited, brought before the judge for sentence. Humanity is adulterous, the metaphor Scripture uses so often for ‘going after other Gods,’ breaking the original bond between mankind and its Creator, but equally applicable to all sin, which carries us far from God.

And like the woman in the story, they have us bang to rights. Caught in the act of preferring the world to the world’s Maker, putting our own ideas before those of the Lord. The Pharisees represent the Law, God’s covenant with the Jews, and the Law condemns us. Of course, in the story, Jesus reminds them that the Law also condemns *them* as sinners, because no one is justified under the Law, no one can stand in justice before God.

At the end of the passage “they went away one by one, […] and Jesus was left alone with the woman.” In Jesus Christ, God dismisses the old covenant, the Law, and makes it into something new, in which He will have a direct relationship with us. “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old,” the Lord says to Isaiah, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

The Pharisees certainly didn’t see it coming, but certain of those ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ did, and so they followed after Jesus, like S. Paul, who says, “not having a righteousness of my own which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” This is the “righteousness which comes from God” in which lies humanity’s hope, thanks to the life, passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

That’s one of the reason’s we’re reading this passage *now,* on Passion Sunday, as Lent shifts gears and we concentrate ever more closely on the Passion of the Lord, in preparation for Easter, “that [we] may know Him and then power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible [we] may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

That is, after all, why we relive these events, year after year, so that our *whole* life reflect this liturgical life we live in the Church’s round of fast and feast, in which this reconciling of mercy and justice, of man with God, is recalled and celebrated. To remind us that because of what Christ has done for us, and *only* because of it, we too can hear the words addressed to the adulteress, and through her to all of mankind: “Go, and sin no more.” And having received God’s forgiveness, to forget “what lies behind,” to strain forward “to what lies ahead,” to “press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”