

Closing Prayer

O God,
you have made us for yourself,
and against your longing there is no defence.
Mark us with your love,
and release in us a passion for your justice
in our disfigured world;
that we may turn from our guilt and face you,
our heart's desire
through Jesus Christ.

Janet Morley⁴

Ash Wednesday

Principal Service readings

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17	A warning and a vision of plenty
or Isaiah 58.1-12	True fasting, the Sabbath observance
Psalms 51.1-18	A prayer for forgiveness
2 Corinthians 5.20b–6.10	Now is the day of salvation
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21	Good works done in secret
or John 8.1-11	The woman caught in adultery

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The woman caught in adultery

¹Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all the people, ⁴they said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' ⁶They said this to test Jesus, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

John 8.1-11 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Commentators generally agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery did not originally belong to the fourth gospel. 'This popular ancient tradition about Jesus, which 'floated' in written Jesus material, was incorporated into various manuscripts at different places in early textual traditions, mainly in the fourth gospel (after 7.36; 7.44; 7.52 or 21.25), but also in Luke (after Luke 21.38).'² It does not really fit in with the complex thought of John 7.1 – 8.59. However, it is accepted within the biblical tradition, and plays a role in the liturgy and life of the church.

Here, it is used as an Ash Wednesday reading and we can easily see the focus on judgement and forgiveness. Jesus is isolated from the crowd and goes to the Mount of Olives (8.1), presumably to pray. A new day begins with the assembly of 'all the people' and Jesus begins to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees lead a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery into the middle of Jesus and the crowd. They accuse her and challenge Jesus about the case (8.4-5). They say they know what Moses would do in such a situation (8.5; cf. 6.32-31; 9.29), but they are testing to see if Jesus could appear to be in conflict with the law and Moses, to see if they could have something against Jesus (8.6). They are not really interested in the fate of the woman but in finding fault with Jesus.

It is impossible to find a precise reason why Jesus bends down and writes with his finger on the ground, and even more impossible to guess what he might be writing. Is he expressing indifference to the challenge? Is he giving himself time to think? Is he showing disappointment in the proceedings? As the scribes and Pharisees continue to question him, Jesus stands up and insists that one without sin should cast the first stone (8.7). He then disengages from the conversation and bends down to continue to write on the ground (8.8). The scribes and Pharisees leave one by one. They leave in order of seniority in a chain reaction in which no-one can claim to be sinless. Nothing is said of the people, but perhaps they leave too. Jesus is left alone with the woman (8.9).

² *The gospel of John* / Francis J. Moloney. – Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 1998. – ISBN-13 978-0-8146-5967-5. – p.259.

Now the woman herself becomes an active character in the story, drawn in by a question from Jesus: 'Has no one condemned you?' (8.10). Jesus addresses her as a person; she is no longer an object. Addressing him as 'Lord', the woman shows reverence for him (8.11a). On the basis of this established relationship Jesus tells her to: 'Go and sin no more' (8.11b).

For Ash Wednesday, the lesson on compassion and forgiveness is not lost.

Quotations

1

The Pharisees are tense, but he is calm and relaxed throughout; he accepts the woman openly and lovingly, as an adult and as a person. He has a sureness of touch; he can handle the situation and the relationship with her because he has nothing to be afraid of in himself ... He must have completely accepted and integrated his own sexuality Only a man who has done so, or at least begun to do so, can relate properly to women.

Maria Boulding,³ 1929–2009

2

I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise, it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.

C. S. Lewis, 1898–1963

3

Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

Corrie Ten Boom, 1892–1983

Related topics

For further study:

Lent; conversion; repentance; fasting

³ In *Consider your call : a theology of monastic life today* / D. Rees and others. – London : SPCK, 1978. – p.169.