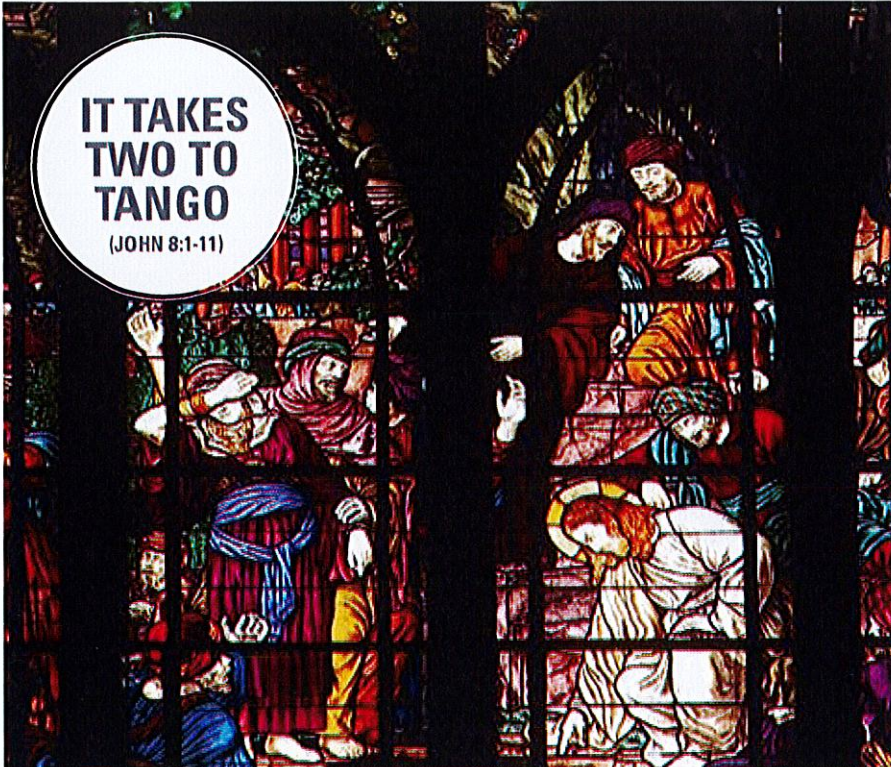


IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

(JOHN 8:1-11)



Stained glass scene, in the Church of Saint-Jean de Montmartre, of Christ and the woman caught in adultery

The flowing narrative in our Gospel reading today from John is quite unlike the style of the Fourth Evangelist and reminds the reader more of the stories in the account of Luke.

Jesus is put on the spot by his critics and asked for his opinion as to what should be done about a woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus is being judged; but he turns the process around and focuses it on the characters who want to catch him out.

The judgement of the Law is clear: the woman should be stoned to death. But the point of the confrontation is not the fate of the unnamed woman; it is to find something with which to accuse and convict Jesus. It is a case of Jesus versus Moses, and so there should be no question of the outcome.

Jesus refuses to engage in the debate, but rather challenges his self-righteous opponents to initiate the sentence of death. They and all the others apparently melt away, until Jesus and the woman are left alone, and for the first time she is addressed directly. Jesus does not judge her, but offers her the possibility of a new life and a restored relationship with God, when he says "Do not sin again". The past is over, forgiven and forgotten; what matters is the new life from now on. ■

LEARN

In the Fourth Gospel, the opponents of Jesus are generally referred to simply as "the Jews".

The term "the Jews" usually refers to the members of the religious and political establishment, not to the people as a whole.

In the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, these characters are described as "the chief priests, the scribes and the elders": they are the ones who bring about the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Pharisees were lay leaders, based locally in the synagogue.

REFLECT

Adultery requires at least two participants. It is significant that only the female partner is dragged before Jesus. Jesus' response is to offer the unnamed woman the opportunity of a new beginning. He does not condemn her, he does not criticise the Law to which his opponents appealed, but rather he challenges his opponents to act on their own convictions – and be convicted themselves in the process.

As with all Gospel stories, we are being asked, "whose side are you on?" Are you with the religious authorities who parade this unfortunate woman in public to Jesus as a test case? Are you with Jesus, who refuses to sit in judgement? We are not told whether the woman was involved in this affair through passion or simply through poverty. And what about the man involved, who apparently escapes scot-free?

The only individual person with whom Jesus interacts directly in this episode is the unnamed woman who is, in many ways, the unwitting excuse for the attack on Jesus. They are left alone, once all the others have sidled off when Jesus challenges them to declare themselves innocent and so entitled to stand in judgement and exact the penalty. Jesus treats the woman with respect; he speaks to her properly and offers her the chance of a new start. That is the message of Lent, that we are all being presented with the opportunity to begin again with a clean slate. We can stand with the woman's accusers, with the woman herself, or with Jesus. Where do you stand in this story? ■

DO

Find out about the refuge for women in your local area and the reasons why women go there.

SAY

No need to recall the past... See, I am doing a new deed.

(see Isaiah 43:18, 19)

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Give me justice, O God,
and plead my cause against a nation that is
faithless.
From the deceitful and cunning rescue me,
for you, O God, are my strength.

COLLECT

By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God,
may we walk eagerly in that same charity
with which, out of love for the world,
your Son handed himself over to death.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of
the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 43:16-21

A reading from the prophet Isaiah.

Thus says the Lord,
who made a way through the sea,
a path in the great waters;
who put chariots and horse in the field
and a powerful army,
which lay there never to rise again,
snuffed out, put out like a wick:

No need to recall the past,
no need to think about what was done
before.

See, I am doing a new deed,
even now it comes to light; can you not see
it?

Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness,
paths in the wilds.

The wild beasts will honour me,
jackals and ostriches,
because I am putting water in the wilderness
(rivers in the wild)
to give my chosen people drink.
The people I have formed for myself
will sing my praises.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalm 125

Response:

**What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.**

1. When the Lord delivered Zion from
bondage,
it seemed like a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs. (R.)
2. The heathens themselves said: "What
marvels
the Lord worked for them!"
What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad. (R.)
3. Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.
Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap. (R.)
4. They go out, they go out, full of tears,
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of
song,
carrying their sheaves. (R.)

SECOND READING Philippians 3:8-14

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the
Philippians.

I believe nothing can happen that will
outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing
Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have
accepted the loss of everything, and I look
on everything as so much rubbish if only I
can have Christ and be given a place in him.
I am no longer trying for perfection by my
own efforts, the perfection that comes from
the Law, but I want only the perfection that
comes through faith in Christ, and is from
God and based on faith. All I want is to know
Christ and the power of his resurrection and
to share his sufferings by reproducing the
pattern of his death. That is the way I can
hope to take my place in the resurrection of
the dead. Not that I have become perfect yet:
I have not yet won, but I am still running,
trying to capture the prize for which Christ
Jesus captured me. I can assure you my
brothers, I am far from thinking that I have
already won. All I can say is that I forget the
past and I strain ahead for what is still to
come; I am racing for the finish, for the prize
to which God calls us upwards to receive in
Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!
Now, now – it is the Lord who speaks –
come back to me with all your heart,
for I am all tenderness and compassion.
Praise to you, O Christ, king of eternal glory!

GOSPEL

John 8:1-11

A reading from the holy Gospel according to
John.

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At
daybreak he appeared in the Temple again;
and as all the people came to him, he sat
down and began to teach them.

The scribes and Pharisees brought
a woman along who had been caught
committing adultery; and making her stand
there in full view of everybody, they said
to Jesus, "Master, this woman was caught
in the very act of committing adultery, and
Moses has ordered us in the law to condemn
women like this to death by stoning. What
have you to say?" They asked him this as a
test, looking for something to use against
him. But Jesus bent down and started
writing on the ground with his finger. As
they persisted with their question, he looked
up and said, "If there is one of you who has
not sinned, let him be the first to throw a
stone at her." Then he bent down and wrote
on the ground again. When they heard this
they went away one by one, beginning with
the eldest, until Jesus was left alone with
the woman, who remained standing there.
He looked up and said, "Woman, where are
they? Has no one condemned you?" "No
one, sir," she replied. "Neither do I condemn
you," said Jesus "go away, and don't sin any
more."

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
(all bow during the next two lines)
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the
Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living
and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Hear us, almighty God,
and, having instilled in your servants
the teachings of the Christian faith,
graciously purify them
by the working of this sacrifice.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Has no one condemned you, woman? No
one, Lord.
Neither shall I condemn you. From now on,
sin no more.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

We pray, almighty God,
that we may always be counted among the
members of Christ,
in whose Body and Blood we have
communion.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE PEOPLE

Bless, O Lord, your people,
who long for the gift of your mercy,
and grant that what, at your prompting, they
desire
they may receive by your generous gift.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Many people seem to think that true religion
is defined by "giving up things". In a sense
it is far easier to deny one's body than quietly
and soberly to surrender your whole self for
God's possessing. In Lent, how much easier
to give up wine or chocolate than seriously to
tackle our impatience. A friend of mine who
was prepared to fast most rigorously in Lent
was horrified when I suggested daily Mass
and half an hour's prayer instead.

Sister Wendy Beckett