

King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the woman 'caught in adultery'

By Rev'd Dr Jenny Morgans

in the College Chapel on the Strand,

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Readings: John 8:2-11, Psalm 91: 1-6

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL to those in the know) is the set list of Bible readings that we hear in church each Sunday. It goes through the Bible over a period of three years – known as Year A Year B and Year C. For every Sunday Eucharistic Service there is a set Psalm, Hebrew Bible reading and New Testament reading, and it's always the same rolling three-year cycle.

In the Church of England, there are some times of the year in which churches are "allowed" to choose their own readings. This is basically the periods of what's called Ordinary Time, green season. But, for Sundays in the major church festivals – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, All Saints and All Souls – all Church of England churches are supposed to stick to the set texts. Now, in many ways, the lectionary is a great thing – it means that all churches work their way through a significant chunk of the Bible every three years. It also means that lazy preachers only need three years' worth of sermons!

The trouble is though, that you might have attended church every Sunday for your whole life and *never* have heard this gospel read aloud or preached upon. And it's not clear why some passages are included while some are excluded. It's not that 'tricky' passages are left out. I wince regularly at the wanton cruelty, the gratuitous violence and the obscure laws that we sometimes read in public worship. But there does seem to be a strange omission in the lectionary of so many biblical women and girls, including the story of today's woman. This might not seem important – but how can women and girls (the majority of both the global population and generally of people who attend churches) know their place in the life of God and God's people if they do not see themselves represented in church? We are left simply not knowing that we can have formative conversations about women and their interactions with God and each other.

And that's not to say that biblical stories of women and girls are encouraging, or uncomplicated, or easy to hear. In fact, they are as complex, nuanced and varied as the stories of boys and men. And this Gospel reading we've had today is no different.

Thankfully today is a Wednesday in a university chapel not a Sunday in a Church of England church, and so this term we are working our way through the gospel of John. There are lots of striking and significant things that we need to know about the Fourth Gospel. One thing you might know about is the 7 'I AM' statements. In John, Jesus utters 7 different profound statements about his identity, all beginning I AM.

I wonder how many between us we can remember:

- the bread of life (6:35),
- the light of the world (8:12),
- the door / gate (10:7),
- the good shepherd (10:11, 14),
- the resurrection and the life (11:25),
- the way, the truth and the life (14:6)
- the true vine (15:1).

Bridget Baguley¹ argues that in the gospel of John, just as important as the '7 I AMs' in revealing to us who Jesus is, are 7 different encounters that Jesus has with women. Can we remember/guess: (clue, first one)

- The woman caught in adultery
- Mary Jesus' mother
- The woman at the well
- Martha
- Mary of Bethany
- Mary Magdalene
- The women at the cross: including his aunt and Mary the wife of Clopas.

Interestingly, 5 of these 7 encounters are given only in John, and are not given in the other three gospels.

Baguley writes that "At a time when women were generally not accorded public roles, were not accepted as reliable legal witnesses, were not to be directly taught (in particular not *Torah*), and were defined largely by their roles of mother and wife, it is notable both that Jesus models such an inclusive and affirmative attitude to them, *and* that the author of John chooses to include these episodes in his gospel." If only the church took a lead from Jesus and the author of John in this regard! If you exclude the raising of Lazarus, the crucifixion and the resurrection, in three full years of Sunday Gospel readings you will only hear 3 of these 7 encounters on Sunday mornings.

¹ Bridget Baguley, *Meeting Jesus in John's Gospel: Seven Encounters with Women* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2015).

So, let's do some of the work that we don't get to do according to the lectionary.

This passage runs contrary to rabbinic writings and both Jewish and Christian attitudes of the time towards female sexual misconduct. The episode occurs in the physical centre of Jewish religion and law, the temple. On their home turf, we're told that scribes and Pharisees want to test Jesus. 'Scribes' is a technical term for certain types of Jewish religious teachers. They bore some responsibility for interpreting the law and had certain legal powers under the Roman occupation of Palestine. Pharisees were a religious and political group emphasising strict adherence to Jewish law.

They place a woman caught in adultery in the centre of the action, calling for her punishment by stoning and asking Jesus to confirm the sentence as just. We do not know any more details about what has happened, nor do we know the woman's name. I cannot imagine how she might have been feeling.

The scribes and Pharisees dehumanise the woman, to them she is merely an object for debate and discussion. The spotlight of their condemnation falls on the woman but also potentially on Jesus, as they challenged him to refute the law of Moses. But the light of the world will not be trapped or confined in this way, and he will cast his light broadly as the action progresses, revealing what is hidden to them all.

The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy state that in the case of adultery two or three male witnesses of good character are needed, and *both* parties are to be put to death by stoning, both are equally guilty. In the absence of an accused man, and sensing a setup, Jesus stoops to write on the ground. What or why he writes no one knows, and there are different interpretations of this action. There is a mediaeval tradition that Jesus was listing the sins of the accusers, although I doubt he had the time for this! Either way it certainly creates tension in the action and the narration of it. Jesus then reframes the requirement for witnesses to be of good standing, to be those without sin. Only such a witness may cast the first stone. Of course, no such witness exists. The accusers leave. They cannot bear the light of truth to fall upon their deeds.

Now, since adultery was regarded as a serious crime in first century Palestine, his listeners and early readers of this story would have found Jesus's attitude shocking. Adultery had a specific meaning in the society of the time: it referred to a man having sex with someone else's wife. The marital status of the man was irrelevant. This is a reminder that accusations of adultery often have a great deal to do with power. This story is a sign of an attitude that treats adultery as the ultimate sexual sin because it is a violation of male property rights over women.² In the most prevalent reading of this text, which can be traced back to St Augustine, Jesus is the embodiment of grace and the woman is the embodiment of sin. This interpretation, focused exclusively on the woman and her sexual behaviour as sin, dehumanises and objectifies her just as the scribes and Pharisees did. A more careful reading of the story, however, shows that this narrow polarity between Jesus and the woman distorts the text.

² See Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Augsberg Fortress, 1992)

After the crowd departs one by one, the woman defiantly stands before Jesus, and he speaks to her directly. He honours her with the same human dignity he gives to the religious elders, speaking directly to her and offering her the opportunity to take responsibility for her sins and to change her way of living. Indeed, what is striking about this story is that Jesus treats the woman as the social and human equal of the scribes and Pharisees, speaking to all about sin. Having saved her from death, Jesus does not condemn her. But the story is left open-ended, we do not know whether she recognised who Jesus was and believed in him, or just went on her way, relieved to be alive.

In a project exploring Jesus's sayings about sex, violence and money, Symon Hill³ shared this passage with a number of people who were not Christian and had never heard it before, and he asked them what they thought. Some noted Jesus's gentle and calm demeanour. Some thought his writing in the sand was rather mystical, like he was consulting something or seeking guidance. One woman said that Jesus seemed 'bored of these stupid people asking him questions and trying to catch him out', while another was angry that Jesus does not ask for the woman's side of the story. Hill and others argue that instead of the passage being called 'the woman caught in adultery', it should be titled 'the men caught in hypocrisy'.

Jesus neither condones the sin nor condemns the sinner. Looking at this story within the scope of the whole gospel, suggests that Jesus is not above the law, but he will deepen it, he comes not to abolish but to fulfil it in his person. For Jesus, the key feature is not the woman's sinfulness *per se*, rather it is remarkable that he treats both the woman and the accusers as sinners. He speaks of sin to all those present. Her sin is on display and theirs needs calling out in order that they may all be invited into new life. Jesus invites both the scribes, the Pharisees *and* the woman to begin life anew in the present moment. They are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life. This story fits with John's overall purpose, to show Jesus as the divine son of God, so that readers – including us here today – may believe, may repent their sins, and may receive life instead of death.

Amen.

³ Symon Hill *The Upside-Down Bible: What Jesus Really Said About Money, Sex and Violence* (London: DLT, 2015)

Amen.