

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126 (125); Philippians 3:8-14; John 7:53-8:11

Neither do I condemn you... from now on do not sin again

John 7:53 [Then each of them went home, 1 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When 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." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."]

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This well-loved and remembered story has more than one meaning. It is, of course, a story of compassion and forgiveness. It is also a story about Jesus, his person and his authority. His style is instructive: a refusal to engage with the categories of judgment forced upon him.

This narrative is missing from early and

important manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel, for example *Papyrus 66* and the *Codex Sinaiticus*. No Greek church father, prior to the twelfth century, comments on it. If you skip from 7:52 to 8:12, the text is seamless. The vocabulary (Mount of Olives, daybreak, teacher) is Lucan rather than Johannine. It seems to be a floating tradition, found elsewhere in the manuscript tradition: Jn 7:36; 7:44; 21:25 and more fittingly in Lk 21:38. It is not, therefore, part of John's Gospel or theology. Nevertheless, it could very easily be historical. Augustine says people ("enemies of the true faith") excised the text, lest promiscuity be treated leniently! Although definitely not part of the ancient text, the story is accepted by all churches as canonical.

KIND OF WRITING

Our story is a pronouncement story, an anecdote about Jesus, a *chreia*, in the form of a *synkrisis*, a comparison between the scribes and the Pharisees and Jesus himself.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) *The general rule*

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (Lev 20:10)

If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. (Deut 22:22)

(ii) *However, there was a legal bias slightly in the woman's favour.*

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man

Thought for the day

The rush to judgment—so evident in our public discourse—is matched only by the resistance to forgiveness. Endlessly, we investigate, accuse, judge. As we all know, what is needed eventually is forgiveness—but where do we find it? In the Christian vision we do not have to carry the burden of our guilt forever precisely "because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed." (Rom 3:25 NET) In the current idiom, "we do forgiveness" and so we should!

Prayer

God, whose name is mercy, we thank you for your gracious compassion to all. We ask that, as we have received, so we may give and forgive. Amen.

meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbour's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offence punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbour. Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her. (Deut 22:23–27)

(iii) *By law, the witnesses had a leading role in the punishment.* The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut 17:7)

(iv) *There are contrasting texts in the OT:* He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love

Lent 5	Is 43:16-21	Return from Exile	The "old" past; the new future
Exile	Ps 126 (125)	God's delivery	Time of sowing; time of harvest
	Phil 3:8-14	Running the race	Past, present and future
	Jn 8:1-11	The woman in adultery	Forgiveness: past and future

toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. (Ps 103:10–14)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Context of admissibility of evidence: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” (John 7:51) Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” (John 8:13)

(ii) Context of non-judgement: You judge by human standards; I judge no one. (John 8:15) Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? (John 8:46)

ST PAUL

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Rom 14:10–12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 53 This is a transition. Who the “each of them” might be is not so clear. The story resembles the synoptic location of disputes with the authorities.

Verse 1 The term “Mount of Olives” is found only here in John. Elsewhere it is frequent: Matt 21:1; 24:3; 26:30; Mark 11:1; 13:3; 14:26; see esp. Luke 21:37; 22:39. The temple does fit in John 7-9.

Verse 2 “Daybreak” occurs only here in John.

Verse 3 “Scribes” are mentioned only here in John. Specifically, the OT was concerned with adultery between men and married women. “Standing in front” is the position of judgement / accusation.

Verses 4-5 “Teacher” is used only here in John. It promotes Jesus as an expert, but it is used to entrap him. Notice the legal irregularities: no witnesses and the woman is alone with no sign of the man. The Mishnah—representing rabbinic tradition—specifies stoning only for the man. Moses is named—but God had dictated the Law to Moses, so Jesus is being invited ultimately to go against not just Moses but God himself.

Verse 6 A frequent motive in the synoptic Gospels. Cf. Mk 3:6. Not speaking is very unlike the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. In the cultural context it signals disengagement and is thus correctly understood by the accusers. As R. E. Brown puts it, “one cannot help but feel that if the matter were of major importance, the content of the writing would have been reported.” St Augustine writes, *What else does He signify to you when He writes with His finger on the ground? For the law was written with the finger of God; but written on stone because of the hard-hearted. The Lord now wrote on the ground, because He was seeking fruit.*

Verse 7 Because they continued to question him, they have correctly grasped Jesus’ refusal to engage. Stoning is based in part on Deut 17:7 above. However, the preceding phrase, “anyone among you who is without sin” is unprecedented. John’s has no ethics except to believe in Jesus and to love.

St Augustine writes: *The two were left alone, the wretched woman (misericordia) and Mercy (misericordia). But the Lord, having struck them through with that dart of justice deigned not to heed their fall, but, turning away His look from them, “again He wrote with His finger on the ground.”*

Verse 8 Resumption of writing indicates that Jesus disengages again.

Verse 9 Have the older ones more sense and less overriding zeal? It may also indicate that even senior members of the community are not without sin.

Verse 10 Thus far the woman has been treated as an object, a pawn in male theological disputes. Jesus treats her as a

human being and addresses her respectfully (woman = our “ma’am”).

Verse 11 The case has collapsed and Jesus will not build it up again. The very last line (cf. Jn 5:14) removes any potential suspicion of laxity.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Compassion for human frailty combined with a gentle challenge to a better life marked the response of Jesus. From whom have you experienced a compassionate challenge? What was that like for you? To whom have you given such a challenge?

2. The Pharisees and scribes self-righteously condemned the woman until Jesus brought them in touch with their own sinfulness. This was a conversion moment for them and they turned away from their quest for the death of the woman. Have there been times when your awareness of your own fragility and sinfulness has helped you to be less judgemental of others?

3. “What do you say?” can be an embarrassing question. Jesus had the courage to voice an opinion, even though it was against the party line of the day. When you have seen that courage shown – by yourself, or by another? What was the result?

PRAYER

God of power, God of mercy, you bring forth springs in the wasteland and turn despair into hope.

Look not upon the sins of our past, but lift from our hearts the failures that weigh us down, that we may find refreshment and life in Christ, our liberator from sin, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, mighty and strong, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Deuteronomy 26:4-10	Creed	Ps 91 (90)	Roman 10:8-13	Luke 4:1-13
Lent 2	Genesis 15:5-12,17-18	Covenant	Ps 27 (26)	Philippians 3:17-4:1	Luke 9:28-36
Lent 3	Exodus 3:1-8,13-15	Burning bush	Ps 103 (102)	1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12	Luke 13:1-9
Lent 4	Joshua 5:9-12	First Passover	Ps 34 (33)	2 Cor 5:17-21	Lk 15:1-3,11-32
Lent 5	Isaiah 43:16-21	The Exile	Ps 126 (125)	Philippians 3:8-14	John 8:1-11

I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me

Phil 3:8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ, 9 and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness. 10 My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, 14 with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (NET translation)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today we hear the voice of Paul as an old man, writing in the context of house arrest. It shows an astonishing energy for the Gospel in advanced age as he reflects, perhaps for the last time, on his “conversion” and its consequences.

KIND OF WRITING

This is really a kind of comparison or *synkrisis* again, contrasting Paul the Pharisee (vv. 2-6) with Paul the apostle (vv. 8-11). Notice the vocabulary of confidence, credentials, assets, liability and loss. He appends a correction in vv. 12-14, lest people think he has overstated himself.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context for our passage is provided by the immediately preceding verses, where we read:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials—though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has

good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. (Phil 3:2-7 NET)

It looks as if Paul is dealing again with “Judaizers”, insisting on the full practice of the ritual Law, whether they be of Jewish or Gentile background. It causes him to parade once more his pedigree as an Israelite only to set it aside firmly—gruffly?—on account of Christ.

RELATED PASSAGES

This highly compressed passage may help in grasping what is at stake in our reading.

We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not! But if I build up again those things I once destroyed, I demonstrate that I am one who breaks God’s law. For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside God’s grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:15-21 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 8 This verse picks up the idea of liability from v. 7. The loss here is both literal and ironic—loss of previous pedigree but gain in Christ. Dung is more literally “excrement” (contrast the dainty “rubbish” in the lectionary).

Verse 9 Should we speak here of

Christ’s faithful or faith in Christ? Many arguments support the translation offered (NET). The difference is hugely significant: our relationship with God is based on the faithfulness of *Jesus* to God and not first of all on *our* faith in him.

Verses 10-11 The sequence may seem wrong but it does reflect Paul’s own journey. His encounter with the Risen Lord led to his new understanding of the cross (see Galatians 1 and 3). This compressed writing may be expanded as follows: *God’s project of including all humanity in his grace, achieved on the cross, has become Paul’s project in a deeply existential way, so that everything Jesus was Paul desires to become.* In that sense, there is for Paul no distinction or at least no separation between his conversion encounter with the risen Lord and his apostolic call and mission. In Paul’s mind, *both* the cross and the resurrection are disclosures of God’s faithfulness to fractured humanity.

Verse 12 A contrast with the Judaizers, who wish to be perfect, is implied. Cf. *For the love of Christ has taken hold of us, since we have concluded this, that Christ died for all; therefore all have died.* (2 Cor 5:14 NET adjusted)

Verse 13a A further insistence that the great apostle has not already arrived. What he “forgets” could be either his previous pedigree or perhaps even his achievements as an apostle (more likely).

Verse 13b-14 Paul, as an old man, is still consumed by Christ. To capture it he uses the athletic metaphors. The race is still on and Paul is still competing. The “upward call” is a puzzle. It might refer to the president of the games calling a victor up to receive his prize (limiting the reference to Paul). More likely, it refers to the universal call to salvation in Christ.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Could I name the “losses” and gains for myself in being a disciple?
2. The “race” is not at all over: am I still running at full strength?

PRAYER

We thank you for your call, O God, as we ask that we may never lose sight of the great prize to which we are all called. Give us again the old enthusiasm that we may single-minded as we stretch out for the things that lie ahead. Amen.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth

Is. 43:16 Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
 17 who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
 they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
 18 Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
 19 I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
 I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
 20 The wild animals will honour me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
 for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
 to give drink to my chosen people,
 21 the people whom I formed for myself
 so that they might declare my praise.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In terms of the Lent first reading cycles, we are at the return from the exile in Babylon, another signal moment in the history of Israel. Many passages from Is 40-55 could have been chosen, but, these verses (in particular vv. 18-19) look forward to the Gospel reading in a most helpful way.

KIND OF WRITING

The poetry here is very rich with resonance of others texts in the Bible (see the notes for details). In a striking way, the text uses colourful imagery to give special energy to the poetic parallelism.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As often observed in these notes, the reading is from Second Isaiah, who preached just as the exile was coming to an end. He spoke words of great encouragement to a chronically discouraged people.

RELATED READINGS

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? So

the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 51:9-11)

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. (Exodus 15:22-25)

I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (Isaiah 43:6-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 The exodus is evoked (see Ex 14-15). In a word, the same liberator God will deliver them from Babylon. Cf.

Is 11:15-16.

Verse 17 God brought out the Egyptian army for its destruction. A striking change of metaphor expresses the ease with which God will overcome the new enemies. Earlier, the same metaphor is used to speak of God compassion for Israel: *a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.* (Isaiah 42:3)

Verse 18 The newness of God's deed is insisted upon, although Isaiah has just referred to the past as a source of hope. Again, the same liberator God, but doing an absolutely new deed.

Verse 19 19a really continues the thought of 18ab. However, 19b invites the participation and perception of the hearer. 19cd tells of the novelty of the new exodus: instead of being a dry path through water, the desert itself will be transformed into a waterway.

Verse 20 Cf. by way of link: Ex 15:22-25 (above); 17:1-7; Num 20:2-13.

Verse 21 *Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.* (Psalms 33:12) *For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.* (Deuteronomy 7:6)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The remembrance of God's presence and action in former times can be a great help in the present. A prayer of hope and renewal.

2. God wants us to be free (For freedom God has set us free - Paul). What is binding me at the moment, holding me back from rich discipleship and full engagement? A prayer of continued faithfulness.

3. If I were to wish for something truly new from God in my life, what would that be? A prayer to the God of surprises.

PRAYER

God, you alone offer us the freedom which is deep and lasting. Let us know our need of you, that we may be open to your gifts of freedom and forgiveness. Having known your healing hand, let us be bearers of the good news to all we meet. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126 (125); Philippians 3:8-14; John 7:53-8:11

READINGS 1 AND 3

There is no verbal link between Isaiah 43 and John 8. Nevertheless, the declaration of novelty in vv. 18-19 makes a good preparation for the potentially scandalous behaviour of Jesus in the story of the woman in adultery.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 126 (125) is the perfect response, putting words on the intense feelings of relief and redemption, which marked the return from exile. The response expresses the thrill found in vv. 18-19: What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed we were glad.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 43:16-21

Our Lent stories now bring us to the return from Exile. The reading is rich in metaphors of life and new hope. Is there some word or phrase which really speaks to me?

Second reading

Philippians 3:8-14

In this touching reading, Paul writes as an old man, most likely under house arrest. And still the spark of faith is alive—he is still on the way, as we all are.

Gospel

John 7:53-8:11

People sometimes try to draw us into disputes and would like us to take sides. Just listen and see how Jesus sidesteps the trap set for him.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 7 April

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62

This dramatic reading follows on extremely well from yesterday's Gospel about the woman caught in adultery. Many dimensions could help us, but perhaps the courage and intelligence of Daniel could be underlined.

John 8:12-20

The theme of judgement unites the two

readings—by which standards do we judge? In the discussion with the Pharisees, the Fourth Gospel offers us a deep and still challenging understanding of Jesus. Who was he? Who is he?

Tuesday 8 April

Numbers 21:4-9

We know from our human experience that when something is harming us, we need to face it. Something of that ordinary experience lies beyond this extraordinary story. The image of the serpent lifted up is found on the lips of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, speaking of his own death and resurrection.

John 8:21-30

The image of “lifting up”—so central to John's Gospel—is taken from the story of the bronze serpent. The evangelist reminds us of our need the healing that God provides in Jesus.

Wednesday 9 April

Daniel 3:14-20, 24-25, 28

In this dramatic illustration, faithfulness to the one true God is a deadly risk—and yet God shows himself to be faithful to all who are faithful to him.

John 8:31-42

In early Christian reflection, Abraham was in everyone's mind—notably in Paul's but also as we see in John's gospel. The big question being answered is, who is Jesus?

Thursday 10 April

Genesis 17:3-7

The reading today picks out an emblematic story about Abraham, as a preparation for the Gospel, where Abraham is mentioned again. He was the original man of faith, our father in faith, as Hebrews puts it, who put his trust in God and in a way God puts his trust in Abraham.

John 8:51-59

In the Fourth Gospel, there are *seven* I AM sentences, usually qualified by some image or affirmation such as the good shepherd. The I AM in today's reading is without qualification, an absolute claim to identity with God. While clearly “the-

ological, it may have a grounding in history: *Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am.’* (Mark 14:61–62)

Friday 11 April

Jeremiah 20:10-13

Right up to today, good people are made to suffer when they tell the truth and say it like it is. This was true also in the past: Jeremiah suffered greatly for his convictions and prophecies, in the same way as Jesus would, much later.

John 10:31-42

As often in John's gospel, we are over-hearing later disputes about the identity of Jesus and the arguments for and against. Only in the light of the resurrection did the early Christian really grasp who Jesus was and who the risen Jesus is today.

Saturday 12 April

Ezekiel 37:21-28

This short reading was written a time of national disaster and disgrace. As we listen, we might keep in mind what picture of God comes out of this picture? Can it help me or us today?

John 11:45-56

Today, our reading takes us to the consequences of the story of Lazarus. John's Gospel is looking back after many years of prayer and reflection. The evangelist sees that the cause of Jesus' death was really who he was — the Messiah and the Son of God. Ironically, Caiaphas speaks the a deep truth, even if he doesn't know what he is really saying: *it is better for one man to die for the people.*

