

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 8: Some Notes

Chapter 8 opens with one of the most fascinating (and powerful) of Jesus stories: the story of the woman taken in adultery. (Caught in the act.) The story appears in square brackets or as a footnote, because the story isn't in the earliest texts of John's Gospel. So it seems like a later addition. Cynics might say that the story was added to make Jesus look good – as a mercy person rather than a judgement person. After all, John seems more concerned to explain exactly what Jesus meant than to record exactly what Jesus said. Is this just a story of the sort of thing Jesus might have said and done? HOWEVER, we know that the story was around by about the year 100 (well before the earliest surviving John Gospel texts); and we have an early explanation of why the story was **left out** - at a time when it was quite tough preaching chastity outside and faithfulness within marriage, this story was seen as unhelpful because Jesus was not coming down heavily on adultery.

So we can take this as a true story. There is still a lot to talk about. If we take it that all of Chapter 8 is set in the Temple Treasury, this was in the Court of the Women, and a very public place in which everyone came to pay their dues. If the woman had just been caught in the act, the man must have been with her. Where was the man? Had the woman been given time to get dressed? If not, we have one explanation of why Jesus was keeping his head down? The rules prescribed the penalty for the male adulterer as being buried up to the knees in dung and then strangled. The alternative for both men and women was stoning, though the Roman didn't allow the Jews to impose their own death penalties (of any kind).

The Jewish accusers couldn't care less about the woman. She was just a useful "object", to get Jesus to say the wrong thing: upset the Romans, upset the followers of the Mosaic law, upset those looking for mercy. No wonder Jesus waited. There is a fascinating possibility in the Greek that what he was writing in the sand was a list of the sins of the accusers! What he says to the accusers goes beyond suggesting that some of them might have had sex outside marriage. Remember this is the Jesus who condemned thinking about sex in the wrong context. He was saying to the accusers: Have none of you harboured lusts, maybe towards this very (undressed?) woman?

Jesus doesn't just brush aside the woman's sin. He says "I'm not judging you now. Try making a fresh start." Jesus saw possibility. The accusers saw history, and no future. We maybe still tend to labour people as [whatever], rather than seeing them as whole people with potential for change. It was the Methodist George Whitefield who saw a condemned criminal on the way to the gallows, and commented "There but for the grace of God go I". The Bible (Old Testament in particular) uses personal names: message is "people (individuals) matter".

Lots of things to say about the rest of the chapter; but I recall what Hamlet said to Polonius: "Cut it short, mate!" (Or words to that effect.)