



Ash Wednesday, 22nd February 7.30 pm John 8. 1 – 11

Jesus speaks to the scribes and Pharisees and to the woman taken in adultery.

¹ (Then each of them went home) while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ([nowhere else in John's gospel does Mount Olives appear](#)) 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 ([John does not normally couple scribes and 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. ([Command is also to stone men but her partner is not mentioned here.](#)) 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.^[a] 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.'

Many early textual versions of John's gospel do not include this story at all. In some, it is positioned elsewhere. The story is not about the crime (real or perceived) of adultery but of pride and self-righteousness on the part of the accusers. It has often been used by those who are guilty of something to exonerate themselves by turning the spotlight on others.

On this Ash Wednesday, there are four things we can draw from it:

- the importance of thinking about our own sins before pointing out those of others (when are we like the scribes and Pharisees?)
- the importance of fairness: why were/are some people treated worse than others - in this case, a woman?
- the importance of working out when to apply the letter of the law as opposed to the spirit of the law

- the fact that Jesus does not condemn the woman. Note he doesn't ask her whether she is guilty or not – but where the accusers have gone.

We need to get a balance when thinking about sinfulness. Some parts of the church through the ages have rejoiced in beating people up – sometimes literally – for their sins. And sometimes, we do that to ourselves, exaggerating our crimes, pouring guilt upon guilt. That's not what Jesus seems to do. He simply says *Go and sin no more*. The ashes on our foreheads remind us that we are both sinful and forgiven.