

Some Bible readings, unless you have a particularly fertile inventive imagination quickly exhaust all the possibilities of what you can say about them. Even if you leave to one side the many lengthy tribal roll calls, begetting registers and 101 ways to kill a heifer, there's still a lot between those Bible-black pages to bring a preacher on a roll to a grinding halt. There's only so far even the most gifted of expositors can stretch Jesus' cursing a fig tree say before we run out of steam, metaphors and fruit-flavoured jokes. There are many such readings that we might note, scratch our heads and move on.

There are passages that tend to be avoided because they are not for the squeamish. They're mostly in the Old Testament, but not exclusively. Nobody after all wants to dwell on people making themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven longer than is absolutely necessary.

For other passages of the scriptures we cannot keep going back to see what's new because the meaning has long since been lost- the bit in Exodus where it takes an infant's prepuce to stop God killing Moses, the falling tower at Siloam or Pilate mingling Galileans blood with their sacrifices.

And then there are the bits that just sound, well, strange like all that business with Abraham, floating torches and a cooking pot, the latter half of the book of Daniel and pretty much the entire book of Revelation. Just occasionally though, in that rustling record of our religion, there is a passage which just keeps on giving, a reading which always seems fresh, a bit of the Bible that always seems to have something to say, and that something is never anything less than interesting, pertinent and timed to always precisely the right length. Such a passage we've just heard: John 8: 2-11 or 'the woman caught in adultery' to its friends.

It's probably been pointed out to you before that this tale is something of a literary oddity. It's an 'orphan' passage- it's in St John's gospel but clearly in a different hand to the rest of the book and its plonked rather jarringly at the start of a chapter with no real relation to what comes before and after. In some ancient copies of the gospels it's not there in John at all- instead it turns up in Luke, where, stylistically at least, it's something of a better fit.

But despite the fact that the compilers of our gospels clearly didn't know quite which gospel this tale belonged in, they didn't get suspicious and decide it was better

left out. IN fact, quite the opposite. Of one thing they were certain: it belonged in our faith.

It's not difficult to work out why. The story of the woman caught in adultery illustrates with clarity and charm an immensely attractive side of the Christian faith- and we need as many of those as we can lay our hands on. It's one of the bits of the Bible that many people know or remember, even if they long since stopped going to church or indeed never went at all. That should tell us something.

However, not only is the teaching contained in this passage highly attractive, it is also in those nine short verses gives us one of the central teachings of the Christian faith.

Let's revisit the tale. It opens with Jesus in the Temple, sitting quietly. The holy hush is rudely shattered as in crash a mob of the religiously righteous, morally affronted and frothing at the mouth. They brandish the cause of their outrage: a woman they have caught in the very act of cheating on her husband. One of the reasons this tale is so well remembered is that it's not difficult for us to imagine ourselves right in the heart of the action, standing in that woman's place. Some of us might feel this a little more acutely than others: the puritan lynch mobs have their perennial targets but their focus does tend to shift around as well. For almost all of us it's easy to imagine the heat of self-righteous intolerance breathing on our necks; many of us will have direct experience- it's not like that finger-pointers of faith have ever gone away.

'OK Mr Goody Two-shoes. What do we do with her then?' They know what Jesus should do: pick up that stone and punish the trollop.

'Come on Jesus, stone the sinner.'

Of course Jesus doesn't. If he's going to start stoning sinners, it's going to be a very long day. Looking around at the baying mob, who would he start with?

Jesus lets his listener's work this out for themselves.

'Anyone who is without sin, you throw the first stone'.

The oldest go first. This is not a sign of the greater wisdom of age. Sorry. The elders go first because they've been around a lot longer than everybody else, and that means that they've sinned a lot more than everybody else, because to be alive is to

sin, and the longer you've been alive the more you've sinned. Eventually everybody slinks off, leaving the woman standing in front of Jesus. When Jesus invited the crowd to look in the mirror they see their own faces hideously distorted by the ugliness of sin. Everyone flinches and goes, nobody stays to finish off the victim.

'They know the secrets of their own hearts, they won't condemn you' Jesus says. 'Nor will I'.

This is the hinge on which the whole story hangs. The mob will not condemn this woman for her sins because they have sins of their own. Jesus is without sin- and he will not condemn her.

"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

This part of the story is very often passed over very quickly because next Jesus says 'go away and don't sin again' which then becomes an excuse to pick up the stones again and get back sinner hunting. But that really, really, really isn't what it's all about.

It's easiest to imagine ourselves as the woman in this scenario, and indeed she does stand in for all Christians standing before their Lord. But to fully appreciate the depth of this story, we need to place ourselves among the mob, because that's where we belong too. However laid back and non-judgemental we may imagine ourselves to be; however much we may have been on the receiving end of the stone-throwers ire, however much we may have been the victim; none of us has never felt tempted to stoop down and pick up a stone. I've faced enough metaphorical mobs in my time. But show me a racist or a rich man and I'm reaching for the rocks.

Puritans are not necessarily bad people. That mob that dragged the woman into the Temple in front of Jesus were just doing what people have always done. We are social animals, which means that our world is each other. It also means that we are instinctively hierarchical animals, always jostling for position, and part of making that happen is making very sure that there is always someone lower down the lists than ourselves. Divert the attention of the bullies (which is all of us) onto somebody else. The Mrs Winterson religious pursed-lips brigade are just playing that all too human game. And it is that game that ended with Jesus nailed to the cross. Not too long now and Jesus will be that woman caught in adultery, and this time, there will be

nobody to stay the puritanical hand, nobody to shame the self-righteous into silence, nobody to stop the execution.

This is a particularly rich, powerful gospel story. It challenges all of us: as potential victims of religious intolerance and as potential victimisers of others. It challenges us to accept that Jesus does not condemn other people when they sin. And most difficult of all, it challenges us to accept that Jesus does not condemn us either.