

**Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday of Lent Year C
(John 8:1-11)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded to turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. Turning away from sin means different things for different people. Some are sinners like the woman in today's gospel who finds forgiveness. Others are like her critics: not even recognising that they are sinners, they seem less inclined to turn away from sin.

Every woman in first century Palestine was the possession of a man: of her father initially; and then of her husband or successive husbands. Slaves, both men and women, were the property of the head of the patriarchal household and were expected to be sexually available to the master who was also husband and father. Even free women had fewer choices than men in regard to such matters as choice of life partners and social contact outside the family. In the context of Second Temple Judaism, a woman's sexual liaison with another man was a sin against her husband. Her shame was of less consequence than her husband's loss of status and honour.

We are told nothing of the circumstances of the woman "taken in adultery". We do not even know her name. We know that she could not have been alone in her adultery: there is a man involved who is at least as guilty as the woman. But only the woman is "brought" to Jesus in the public arena, as a spectacle for the assembled crowd. Ironically, the lawyers have little interest in the woman or in her fate. Their interest is in Jesus. They want to test him and catch him out on his attitude to the Law of Moses. They objectify the woman in the interests of their legal debate.

In other words, Jesus is the one on trial in this public setting, and the woman is no more than a dispensable object in the process, a means to a sinister end. Her life is of little concern to her accusers who ask Jesus for a legal opinion on her case. Should the full force of the law be exercised? Should she be stoned to death? Jesus does not dignify their manipulation with a response. Rather, he takes away their power over the woman by bending down and writing with his finger on the ground. What does he write? We can never have an answer to that question. Her accusers keep asking Jesus to provide a ruling. He subverts their ploy by confronting them with their own sinfulness: let the one without sin cast the first stone. They move off one by one and the woman is finally accorded the dignity of responding for herself. She is freed from the burden of condemnation. She can move forward with a strong sense of her worth and the realisation that she has encountered the mercy of God in the person of Jesus.