

Jesus had the most extraordinary encounters and friendships with women. This was in complete contrast to prevailing religious attitude of the day towards women in general, which was pretty grim. For instance, Abraham's covenant with God made on Mount Sinai, was with men – and the men were expected to ensure that their women and children followed the covenant rules. So women were bound to God indirectly, through men. In Talmudic times, women were required to keep all the negative *mitzvot*, or commandments – like not committing adultery or bearing false witness – but they were excused the positive *mitzvot* – such as performing a particular ritual and at particular time. In synagogues women were given their own separate gallery and could only go as far as the second court of the temple. They were not expected to take a significant role in Jewish cultural and national life – although certain strong women in the Old Testament – such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachael and Deborah – were considered heroic. Women could not own property in their own right unless she inherited it from her father and had no brothers. On the other hand, rabbinical literature says things like:

- Israel was redeemed from Egypt by virtue of its righteous women...
- Women have greater faith than men...
- Women have greater powers of discernment...
- Women are more tender-hearted than men...
- Men have knowledge but women have intuition...

- The Almighty gives a greater reward to righteous women than to righteous men...

All these thoughts come from the teachings of the rabbis, and it is from within this literary rabbinical perspective that Jesus' attitude to and friendship with women comes. Because, after all, Jesus was recognised in his own lifetime as a rabbi, a teacher.

Leaving aside all Dan Brown's entertaining nonsense, it would seem that one of his closest friends was Mary Magdalene. After his resurrection, she was the first person he appeared to and he entrusted to her the news of his rising. And there is absolutely nothing in the gospels to suggest that Mary Magdalene was a former prostitute – it wouldn't have mattered to Jesus if she was... but this is a later, patriarchal gloss.

On the other hand, the woman who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair undoubtedly *was* a prostitute – the gospel coyly says that she had a 'bad name in the town'. To touch or allow oneself to be touched by such a woman would constitute ritual impurity – but again, it didn't seem to matter very much to Jesus. Also, most amazingly, he made the clearest and most unambiguous self-revelation to the woman at the well of Samaria – who was not only an unaccompanied woman and therefore of dubious character, but also a Samaritan, whom orthodox Jews regarded with contempt *and* who had gone through five husbands and was now living over the brush with a sixth

partner – yet Jesus says to her: ‘I who am speaking to you, I am he.’

I think Jesus also felt particular affection for mothers. The raising of the widow of Nain’s son is remarkable in that it is the only work of power that Jesus was not asked to do. He raised the young man from the dead simply because he felt compassion for the mother, who was already a widow; she would have spent a long, lonely life living on charity if Jesus has not done what he did. The story ends with the word ‘mother’: ‘...and Jesus have him back to his mother.’

There was another widow, too, whom he praised, when she put one small coin into the treasury.

When he wept over Jerusalem, what did Jesus compare himself to? A mother hen. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I longed to gather you to myself as a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings, but you would not.”

Jesus’ personal authority, his charisma and the truth he taught came from *within*. This is very feminine in character – and when we say ‘feminine’, it doesn’t have anything to do with biological sex or gender – it is a *quality of psychological energy*. It is rooted in the heart of both men and women. Keeping the law, on the other hand, is very masculine in character and is rooted in the head. This is why Jesus often violated the religious laws, rules and regulations that were given from the head instead of the heart. Not simply for the sake of it, but when it was necessary. The greatest sin for the

head is disobeying the law; the greatest sin for the heart is to fail to love.

Today's gospel reading occurs only in the gospel of John – just as the story of the Samaritan woman at the well occurs only in John. When it says that this woman was caught in the act of adultery, it means exactly that – it isn't a euphemism. Her accusers entered the house and found her with her lover *in flagrante delicto* – which is a Latin phrase meaning 'in blazing offence'. Caught in the act – whether the act is adultery, murder, theft... or whatever.

And the anger of the woman's accusers also blazed. In the Mosaic Law it is written: 'If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die – the man that lay with the woman, and the woman herself.' The punishment was public stoning.

Jesus ignores the question put to him by the Pharisees and writes on the ground with a forefinger; this was not an unusual thing to do when teachers or rabbis were expounding the law to their students, but the speculation about what he was writing has been endless – and that's all it can ever be, speculation. The woman herself would have been absolutely mortified, ashamed and afraid. There is a wonderful statue of this story by the 19th century sculptor Rodolpho Bernadelli, which shows Christ with one hand upraised and the woman on the ground, literally hiding herself in the folds of his robe, one hand pressed against her mouth. His expression is one firstly of shame and secondly of

disbelief that she is escaping death. I love it and I have printed it on the back of this week's newsletter.

The point of the story is that Jesus clearly thought that compassion and forgiveness outweighs the strictures of the law with its lists of transgressions and punishments. This is because when Jesus looked at someone, he didn't see what they did, he saw what they *were* – not the doing, but the *being*. That's what the mercy of love does: it distinguishes doing from being. When he looked at the woman caught in adultery, he didn't see what she *did*, he saw what she *was*: a mirror of God – however much that mirror needed cleaning and polishing, that's what she was. A reflection of the divine. That's what we all are, if we only knew it. The Pharisees and scribes did exactly the opposite: they looked at what a person did, not what they were.

We need to take this on board in the Church of today: compassion and forgiveness – which are instruments of love – are far more important than the rules and regulations we impose upon ourselves and others. No one says that rules and regulations don't have their place – of course they do – but when we become obsessed by them, we fail to distinguish what people do from what they are, and we wander far from the path of love.