



*'Christ and the Woman
taken in Adultery'
Painting by Mazzolino*

Week 4: Moses and Jesus: Shepherd and Lawgiver

(John 8.1-11)

Dr Joost Joustra

Bible Reading

...Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 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. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 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. 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." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 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. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Reflection

Ludovico Mazzolino painted a bustling scene on a small vertical panel no more than half a metre high with a rounded top. It shows two groups of people: the first above in the distance on a raised plateau underneath an elaborate portico. On the foreground steps, the second group closer to us seem to be in the midst of fierce debate. Jesus is immediately recognisable in the centre. The group in front of him presents a woman with a downcast gaze. Christ seems to be arguing with the men in this group, pointing at them and at himself as if he is rebuking an accusation. In front of them, three figures are looking down, examining, and discussing a sentence that has appeared on the ground. The words will be familiar to many, although Mazzolino painted them in Hebrew:

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

The Gospel of John tells how the Scribes and Pharisees brought to Christ a young woman accused of committing adultery. They asked him whether the woman should be stoned to death for her crime in accordance with the law, hoping to trick Christ into contradicting those laws. Then he stooped down and wrote the above words with his finger on the ground. They kept asking him and Jesus replied with those words. Then he bent down and wrote on the ground again. Slowly, one by one, the Scribes and Pharisees left, troubled by their own consciences. Finally, Jesus was left alone with the accused woman:

‘Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”’

But where does Moses fit into this story? Typology is not merely about texts. Artists too, have ingeniously connected the Old with the New Testament and vice versa. Especially in Medieval illuminated Bible manuscripts like the *Bible Moralisée*, and in the later Medieval and Renaissance tradition, the printed and more affordable *Biblia Pauperum*, (“Paupers’ Bible”) visual typology is explicitly employed. These manuscripts and printed books only contained selections of the text of the Bible, along with commentary and illustrations. Each page pairs Old and New Testament episodes with illustrations explaining their moral significance in terms of typology.

Mazzolino’s painting uses it in a subtle manner. It takes a while for the viewer to notice it. Behind Christ, further back and to the left of the second figural group amid ongoing Temple life, Mazzolino painted an illusionistic monochrome relief in a roundel, meant to evoke sculptural decoration familiar to his sixteenth-century audience in Ferrara. In tones of brown and gold that evoke bronze, it takes a moment for the relief’s subject to register: Moses delivering the tablets of the law to the Israelites. We see Moses standing on a rock presenting the tablets inscribed with God’s word like an opened book, facing right like Jesus below. Onlookers read,

argue, and point in a manner that is not far removed from the foreground Gospel scene. One of the laws the Israelites would have read states ‘You shall not commit adultery’, but these words are only implied here, unlike the Hebrew sentence on the ground.

A typological dichotomy seems increasingly clear: Jesus appears placed in opposition to Moses. The words from the Gospel of John are often interpreted as Jesus’s superseding of Moses as lawgiver. ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ feels like a rebuttal of the crowds pointing fingers, strictly interpreting Mosaic law. Jesus seems to say, ‘do not point your accusatory fingers at this woman implying her breaking the law without pointing it at yourselves first’, prompting self-questioning instead of strict adherence. And indeed, Mazzolino painted Jesus pointing the finger at himself as well as at the woman.

But there is more to it. Jesus is far from rejecting the Law of Moses, in fact, his understanding of the law is more precise than that of the Scribes and Pharisees: the witnesses upon whose testimony the woman had been accused of a capital crime must come forward. To repeat Jesus’s words above once more, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ Jesus recognised that the accusation was based on second-hand evidence. Therefore, the woman answers “No one, sir”, which leads Jesus to reply ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

He is in this sense not superseding Moses as lawgiver but instead enforcing the law in its proper reading. The focus is no longer on the accusatory mob’s charge against the woman. Jesus instead places the responsibility on the accusers to put forward their witnesses or release the accused. What in Mazzolino’s painting first may seem a typological opposition between Moses and Christ, can in fact be understood as a typological resemblance: Jesus in Moses’s footsteps.

Indeed, moments later in the Gospel of John, Christ elaborates: ‘You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf’ (John 8.15-18).

Mazzolino painted another bronze roundel mirroring the delivery of the tablets. It again features Moses, although the exact subject of this relief is difficult to make out. What is clear is the subtly meaningful typology introduced in Mazzolino’s painting: the central figure of the Old Testament as forerunner to the central figure of the New Testament, and the latter fulfilling this role. Going back to the first chapter of John’s Gospel: ‘The law indeed was given through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1.17).

Questions

- How do you view the relationship between Moses as lawgiver and Jesus as the embodiment of grace and truth?
- How far should our forgiveness go?
- Why does Jesus repeatedly warn us against judging others?
- How did Jesus in dealing with the woman taken in adultery and her self-righteous accusers communicate his word of judgement and reconciliation through his 'body language – and how might we do the same in our own life with others?

Hymn

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

(F.W. Faber)

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more keenly felt than heaven:
there is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.

There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that Christ has shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined,
by the glory of the Lord.

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_wideness_in_gods_mercy

There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation.

You heard your people as they cried to you from slavery
and sent Moses to lead them to a land of milk and honey.

Bringing them safely through the waters of the Red Sea
you gave them the law on Sinai.

In the fullness of time your incarnate Word, Jesus Christ
our Lord,

brought us the good news of grace and truth through the
power of his name.

By your Holy Spirit free us from judging others.

Let your grace reign in our hearts

and fill us with the joy of Christ's transforming love.

We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.