
GANZ – FIFTH MEDITATION FOR LENT 2025



Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery (1621) by Guercino (1591-1666) in the Dulwich Picture Gallery in South London¹

¹ To zoom in to see this painting, go to:
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GuercinoAdultress1621Dulwich.jpg>.

Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (1991) - And yet sometimes I am so sad. Even when I have friends over often for tea or canasta, there is a Great Silence here for weeks and weeks, and the Devil tells me that the years since age seventeen have been a great abeyance² and I have been like a troubled bride pining each night for a husband who is lost without a trace. Children stare in the grocery as if they know ghostly stories about me, and I hear the hushed talk when I hobble by or lose the hold in my hands, but Christ reminds me, as he did in my greatest distress, that he loves me more, now that I am despised, than when I was so richly admired in the past. And Christ still sends me roses. We try to be formed and held and kept by him, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, "Surprise me".

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) - "Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities. The latter cannot understand it when a man does not thoughtfully submit to hereditary prejudices but honestly and courageously uses his own intelligence."

Scripture - John 8:1-11 -

⁸ Then he bent down and continued writing on the ground. ⁹ When they heard this, they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle.

¹⁰ Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹¹ 'No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.'³

When we search a biblical page, we are guided to what we seek by the Chapters and the Verses but also by the Titles⁴ of each discrete *pericope* (purr-IK-ah-pee - "a section or subsection of a religious text").

But none of these three indicators are sacred, as if placed there by the Holy Spirit. They were placed there by biblical scholars: the Chapters (by Cardinal Archbishop Stephen

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**abeyance**" - **2. - 1593** - Temporary inactivity or disuse; suspension; latent condition.

³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 8:8-11.

⁴ I do not know when such Titles were inserted. But you may have noticed that there is no standard set of Titles for the biblical passages.

Langton⁵ in the early 13th century), and the Verses (by Sir Rowland Hill⁶ as deployed in the *Geneva Bible* of 1560)⁷. The use in the latter is what became the standard way of Chapters and Verses in English Bibles, and eventually, in all Bibles.

These markers in the biblical text are indicators of two important things: (1) Their use was an acknowledgement that people no longer were as committed to *memorizing* the biblical text, people able to “find” a text in their memory rather than in a book. Most moderns find it astonishing that anyone would even try to memorize the Bible; and (2) Their use helped biblical readers, who read their Bibles in their native languages (the translations from Hebrew and Greek originals) to communicate with each other about specific passages. Such as the one used as the Gospel in the 5th Sunday of Lent this year: **John 7:53 – 8:11**. I can easily direct you to the text by those helpful markers in the biblical text.

*It is useful to consider that there is great power given a person when he or she can authoritatively indicate **where something (a verse or a chapter) begins and where it ends.***

Even today, there are disagreements among Christian and Jewish scholars, and even among Christian scholars, about where some Chapters (in both Old and New Testaments) end and where the next one begins. For example, in the text above, notice how that tiny verse, John 7:53 – “They all went home” – is attached to the beginning of John 8 rather than placed at the end of John 7. This suggests disagreement about the nature of verse 7:53, which a majority of scholars would today choose to include as the first part of verse 8:1.

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As for example, when we consider the meaning of John 7:53 – 8:11, when does mercy towards another begin and when does it end? What is the proper range of divine mercy, and who has the authority to settle that?

Now, this justly famous text given in the opening eleven verses of John 8 remains, even to this day, a point of argument among scholars. For the appropriate scholarly reasons (a matter of ancient manuscripts, etc.), this famous story (*pericope*), is not included in

⁵ **Stephen Langton (c. 1150-1228)** was a Catholic Cardinal in Britain and Archbishop of Canterbury (1207-1228).

⁶ **Rowland Hill (1495-1561)** was the publisher of the *Geneva Bible*, and as *Wikipedia* notes: “a statesman (member of Parliament and of the Privy Council), polymath, merchant, patron of the Arts, philanthropist during the reigns of the Tudors from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I.”

⁷ **Geneva Bible (1560)** was one of the great translations of the Bible into English, preceding the *King James Version* by fifty-one years, and which was the standard Bible, for example, of Shakespeare.

many creditable modern translations of the Gospel of John. Rather, it is placed as an appendix to that Gospel. Enough scholars judge that it does not belong where it is.

*It is useful to consider that there is great power given a person when he or she can authoritatively indicate **what can be included and what must be excluded**.*

These somewhat technical matters of the biblical text can point us to a deeper resonance inside the meaning of today's Gospel story (John 7:53 – 8:11).

On the one hand, the story demands that we ask and answer: *Who gets to decide where mercy begins and ends*: the crowd of stone-packing men; the Law of Moses; the woman; Jesus; the heavenly Father; or the Holy Spirit hiddenly at work inside the mob, some of whom still retained enough self-awareness to accept the implication of Jesus' question? On the other hand, the story demands that we ask and answer: *Who gets to decide who will be included in the Us*, and who must (indicating *necessity*) get excluded, and in this case, murdered, made not to exist ... and why?

The Painting - Observations and Insights -

Consider the Titles⁸ given this famous text here painted by Guercino in 1621.

The Adulterous Woman (NJB)

A/The Woman Caught in Adultery (NAB; Greek New Testament, 5th ed.; NRSV, and others)

To Throw the Stone (The Message)

The Adulterous Woman (NASB)

An Incident in the Temple (REB)

La femme adultère (La Bible Louis Segond, 1910)

What is striking, in the first place, is how *wrong* those Titles are, except for that of Eugene Peterson (The Message) and of the British translators (REB – the Revised English Bible). The biblical scholars who direct our focus to “the adulterous woman” have placed themselves *among the pre-converted mob of self-satisfied men* ... who think that this “incident” is all about *her*, that unnamed and shamed woman.⁹ (I remember a wise reader of the Scriptures who taught me that the Beatitudes, especially in Matthew,

⁸ No Titles supplied for any pericope in the *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum* (Latin) or in the *King James Version*.

⁹ “Just as popular interpretation reads John 4:16–18 as a judgment against the Samaritan woman, popular interpretation of 7:53–8:11 reads this text as a judgment against the woman. In the most prevalent reading of this text, which can be traced back to Augustine, Jesus is the embodiment of grace, and the woman is the embodiment of sin. A careful reading of the story, however, shows that this narrow polarity between Jesus and the woman distorts the text.” [Gail R. O'Day, “Gospel of John,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, and Sharon H. Ringe, Revised and Updated. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 522.]

indicate the kinds of people among whom Christ chose to stand.) “The Adulterous Woman” is not at all the title that Jesus would have given to this “incident.”

Interpretations of John 7:53–8:11 that focus exclusively on the woman, and on her sexual behavior as sin, continue to dehumanize and objectify her. The text does not isolate the woman’s sin, nor does Jesus single out the woman as “sinner.” Rather, *the text identifies all the characters as in need of and receiving an invitation to new life*. Jesus’ offer of grace and mercy to sinners is extended equally to scribes, Pharisees, and women.¹⁰

Let us then look to the painting. If this *pericope* is in fact about “the adulterous woman” – she condemned to be remembered for centuries in this baleful way – then *why*, for heaven’s sake, is not a single man in that painting looking at *her*? And most importantly, notice that Jesus is *not* looking at her, but for a very different reason.

Next, notice that hand whose shape and location is revealing: the fist that belongs, I think, to the helmeted soldier. (Notice how he has a protective layer of shaped metal making him invulnerable to hurt; she has nothing of the sort.) His hand is clenched, like a fist (revealing the emotion in this scene), but that fist is, I think, compromisingly close to her left breast – he would be able to feel it. The sexual complexity in this biblical story must be noticed and deeply considered. No wonder Jesus had to drop his head and to draw on the ground and to pray to His Father! There was so much and so many layers of wrong going on here.

The man who is “testing” Jesus in this painting – John 8: ⁶They asked Him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against Him.¹¹ – is an old man, who is so far away from the “flames” of his own sexuality, so far that he can now *enjoy* pointing out the failures of those much younger than he, the younger among us who have always made many mistakes in this realm of human relationship. He can now pretend that he himself never made any embarrassing or damaging mistakes. It is this lack of self-awareness that explains the anger we see on Jesus’ face as he is forced to look at such an ugly face. We are grateful that the painter does not make us look at his face.

Did you notice the “halo” (or the “nimbus” as it is called) around the head of Jesus?

¹⁰ Gail R. O’Day, [“Gospel of John,”](#) in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, and Sharon H. Ringe, Revised and Updated. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 523.

¹¹ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 8:6.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**nimbus**” – 1.a. – 1606 – A bright or luminous cloud or cloud-like formation supposedly enveloping or surrounding a deity or supernatural being.

By this fact we are reminded that one can feel “white hot” anger at an injustice or at the deliberate meanness of spirit in the religiously self-satisfied *while never ceasing to be holy*, to be holy as Jesus is holy in this scene. Anger is an emotion that without question God intended us to have, but each of us, through the practice of the Cardinal Virtue of temperance, need to learn anger’s nature, and how properly to use it to protect what is precious.

I might be stretching things when I suggest that we pay attention to where the fingers of the two interlocutors - Jesus and the Old Man – are pointing. *Jesus is pointing directly at the heart of the woman*, as if to force the Old Man to look where He, Jesus, is pointing – to look beyond, to read her heart. We recall how Jesus once said in the house of Simon the Pharisee:

Luke 7 (NAB): ⁴⁴ Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “**Do you see this woman?**” ¹²

And the Old Man is pointing, well, *down there, lower*.

We can be richly rewarded if we spend time with this text trying to decide what the Title that each of those five people painted by Guercino would have given to this “incident”, to what happened that morning in the Temple precincts –

John 8 (NJB): ² At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them.¹³

It is very clear, isn’t it, that each of them, including Jesus, would give this story a Title quite different from each of the others – look at each of those faces! And would not each of them later on, after he or she had thought more deeply about how Jesus had saved all of them that day, change the Title from what had seemed the right one to characterize his or her experience that day to another one?

Prayer: “Bless, O Lord, your people, who long for the gift of your mercy, and grant that what, at your prompting, they desire, they may receive by your generous gift.”

¹² [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk 7:44.

¹³ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 8:2.