

Reflection
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Lent week 5

It is rare enough that we have a woman featured as a central figure in the scripture readings, but today we have women in both accounts. Their circumstances, however, could not be more different. Susanna is clearly a woman of means, respected, God-fearing, with a devoted family and servants, in good standing within the community. The woman in the gospel account- we don't even know her name- is scorned, caught in adultery and facing death- alone. Both, of course are at the mercy of men, lecherous men who would violate Susanna, and righteous men who would stone- the Gospel woman. Susanna can offer no defense against her accusers. And the adulterous woman stands alone. Was there no partner in her crime?

It is not difficult for us today to know women who suffer violence at the hands of lecherous and abusive men, or of those whose lives are made unbearable by righteous religious zealots. They are on our nightly newscasts if not in our immediate circle.

Both of the women in today's stories were rescued from certain death; Susanna by Daniel who shrewdly examines her accusers, and the nameless gospel woman by Jesus.

The protagonists in these stories, however, fare differently in each case. In the Old Testament story of Susanna, the 'scheming' men meet death in revenge of their false accusations; but in the gospel, the 'stoning' men are granted a reprieve; and so too, is the woman.

Perhaps it is from this gospel account that Pope Francis got his most famous line: 'Who am I to judge?'

But note that here Jesus does not say to the scribes and Pharisees, don't judge, don't condemn. Rather what he says is 'remember, remember who you are.' And if we remember, how can we not be merciful?

In a short time, the mercy of God will be writ large in the words of Jesus upon the cross. 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.' In this plea does Jesus perhaps ask his Father also to remember, as the psalms repeat over and over again, remember that your kindness and compassion are from of old. It is not sacrifice and revenge that you seek, but forgiveness and mercy on all that you have made.

The fulfilment of God's remembering will come in the mystery of Easter, when the kindness and compassion that are of old will emerge from the death of the tomb. Perhaps in our own remembering as we approach this one mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection, we too will remember, that we swim always, by our very life and breath, in the sea of God's infinite mercy.