

“Go, and sin no more.”

Jn 8:11

Every now and again we come across a line or two in the Bible that seems to make little sense, and no matter how much we play with ideas the verse remains mysterious. One reason for this is that God deliberately intends that we should have to struggle with the meaning of Sacred Scripture, that we should be willing to engage with the multiple layers of meaning and delve beneath the surface. Often, we cannot be bothered, but when we can be bothered, the effort usually pays dividends. There is a phrase in today’s Gospel where this is especially true: ‘Jesus bent down and wrote with His finger on the ground.’ What on earth does that mean?

First, we must remember that there are no superfluous – no throw-away – words in the Bible: every single word has been placed there for a purpose. Second, every word is designed to give glory to God and to serve the cause of our salvation. Third, every part of the Bible is connected to every other part of the Bible in some way or another. So let’s take a look.

The phrase, ‘finger of God,’ is used four times in the Bible: three times in the Old Testament, and on this occasion in the New Testament. On all three occasions in the Old Testament it is a reference to the power and authority of God. The first time is during the third of the Ten Plagues when the servants of Pharaoh are astonished by what has happened and said to Pharaoh that this was the work of ‘the finger of God’ (Ex 8:19). The other two references concern the tablets of stone on which are written the Ten Commandments by ‘the finger of God’ (Ex 31:18; Dt 9:10).

But the action of Our Lord in today's Gospel passage says more than this. It does not just mention 'the finger of God,' it also says He wrote 'on the ground.' In other translations it says, 'in the dust.' Now consider when God *first* stretched forth His hand, in the Book of Genesis, and 'formed man from the dust of the ground' (Gen 2:7). On that occasion, the power of God brought forth life, human life, the first human to be created, Adam. And God then breathed life into Adam's soul.

Now let's return to the Woman taken in adultery. She is being condemned by the scribes and the Pharisees. They drag her before Our Lord and ask His opinion, 'Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?' And Our Lord makes this enigmatic and mysterious gesture of writing in the dust. We are not told *what* He writes because that's not important. If we had needed to know *what* He wrote, we would have been told. No, it is the action itself – it is the act of writing in the dust of the ground – that is significant.

Just as God, in the Book of Genesis, formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him, so now 'the finger of God' is stretched forth and *re-forms* the woman standing before Him, and raises her up to a new dignity through the power of forgiveness, a power that breathes new life – the supernatural life of sanctifying grace – into her soul. Is it any wonder that this same woman weeps as she anoints the feet of Our Lord while He is reclining at supper in Simon the Pharisee's house later in the Gospel? (Lk 7:36-50) Is it any wonder that she sits in silent wonder and contemplation at His feet whilst her sister, Martha, is busy with the pots and pans in the kitchen? (Lk 10:39-42). Is it any wonder that she is the first to run to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week to anoint Our Lord's body in the tomb, only to discover that He is risen from the dead? (Jn 20:1). And is it any wonder that she is privileged to be the first to see the risen Lord? (Jn 20:11-18).

St Mary Magdalen is the model of Christian virtue: a disciple who has sinned but now turns from sin, who nonetheless weeps in penitence for her sins, who is raised up by sanctifying grace to a new and supernatural life in the sacraments, who sits at the feet of her Saviour in meditation and contemplation, who is confirmed in her discipleship with the nearness of God who exhorts her not to cling to the expectations of this world but continues to point her towards the things of heaven (see Jn 20:17), and who is commanded to take her faith abroad and to tell others of the God whom she has encountered (v.18).

As we enter the final stages of the season of Lent – as we begin the mini season of Passiontide and focus all of our attention upon the sufferings of Our Lord caused by our sins – may we, too, seek to model ourselves, with the help of God’s grace, on this picture of true discipleship, and from now on, ‘sin no more.’

Holy is God. Holy and strong. Holy immortal One. Have mercy on us.