

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 7

In the Temple, a new covenant of mercy

Introduction

One of Jesus' encounters in Jerusalem's Temple. The Temple, God's dwelling ('bajit Elohim'), is a sacred space where contact with the Godhead may take place. It is also the seat of the divine presence and a symbol Israel is proud of, inasmuch as it is a sign of Israel's election.

But why should one ascend to the Temple? What was the meaning of that 'ascension' for the Israelites?

The Israelites had to ascend to the Temple in order to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving at the Passover Festival, at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Shelters. Sacrifices were offered in front of the gate, regarded as the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Some steps led to it, and there were two bronze columns to remind everyone of the presence of Yahweh in the desert as a pillar of fire. Beyond it, there was the enclosed sacred space, the atrium, from which one could go into the courtyard of prayer, divided into two different spaces: the men's courtyard and the women's courtyard. Going further in, there were the priests' vestibule, the Holy and, further recessed in, the Holy of Holies, which had the utmost importance: there the High Priest entered once a year, at the 'Yom Kippur', as a mediator between Heaven and earth.

Given that the Temple was part of the royal precinct, the Royal Palace stood in one of its corners. It was a symbol of the sea. The Holy ('Hekal', in Greek 'Naos', 'Shrine'), symbolically represented the earth, while the Holy of Holies symbolically represented Heaven.

The Temple was the place where God could be encountered, the place where one could 'touch' God's presence, but still, no one could either 'own' God or confine Him. The Israelites kept to mind their experience of deportation (cf Ezk 1:2), when God left the Temple and preceded His people into the land of their exile, so that He would ever remain in their midst (cf Ezk 1-4).

Jesus often used to go up and down the Atrium, and used to teach under the Porch in the Court of Gentiles, where everybody could go in, even the heathen. There He drove out of the Temple the merchants who were selling cattle and sheep and doves for the sacrifices and changing money (cf Jn 2:13ff). Thus, He was

denouncing a cult and a temple which would become useless after His death and where no additional sacrifice should be performed any longer.

The passage of the adulterous woman we are dealing with in this Lectio is followed by a long speech, a discussion with the Jews in the Temple. St John relates that that discussion took place in the Temple Treasury (cf Jn 8:20). In St Luke's parallel passages, Jesus was standing in front of the treasury, looking at people putting their offerings into it, when He noticed a poverty-stricken widow putting in two small coins (cf Lk 21:1-4). But why do the evangelists refer to the Temple Treasury?

The Temple is in itself the place where one can meet God, but also the place where many encounters can take place, the place gathering up people. The prophets used to see it eschatologically as a "House of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:7). Still, in the Heavenly Jerusalem – Revelation tells us – there will be no longer any temple, as the Almighty and the Lamb will be its Temple.

It is indeed in the fourth Gospel, in the Temple, that Jesus prophesies that by His death and resurrection He will be the New Temple, the new place of communion and meeting with God. Neither in Jerusalem nor in any other place will the Father be worshipped any longer, as the Father is looking for "true worshippers who will worship Him in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23). A new reality is brought about by the Resurrection and Pentecost: God's presence everywhere, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the cosmos and, above all, into our hearts (cf Rm 5:5). "Don't you know that you are God's temple and that His Spirit is dwelling in you?" (1 Co 6:19)

Then, the Temple is a place of encounters at many different levels, up to the spiritual inner dwelling of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts. If the New Temple is made up by the baptized with Christ as Head, the Christian temple is the sign of an 'ecclesia' in the midst of human dwellings. The baptized are called to be the People of the New Covenant, and to form with Christ the genuine Holy Temple of God.

Let us try now to enter the Temple with Jesus to be witnesses of His encounters... On one side, He will be put to the test by the Scribes and Pharisees, who will bring to Him an adulterous woman with the sole aim of 'entrapping' Him. On the other side, He will meet the woman. The result of this latter encounter will be completely different....

Now, let us read the text and examine it deeply, in order to grasp the meaning of Jesus' gestures and words.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Wisdom, come into me:

give me the inner sight and hearing,

so that I may never be attached to material things

but on the contrary may ever look for spiritual realities.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Love, come into me:

*pour charity into my heart, more and more.
Holy Spirit, Spirit of Truth, come into me:
grant me that I may come to the knowledge of truth in all its fullness.
Holy Spirit, Living Water “welling up for eternal life”, come into me:
grant me that I may come to contemplate the Father’s face
both in this life and in never-ending joy. Amen.
(St Augustine)*

1. Lectio **(to read the Word / to listen to it)**

John 8:1-11

1 Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 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. 3 The Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle 4 they said to Jesus, ‘Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, 5 and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have You got to say?’ 6 They asked Him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against Him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with His finger. 7 As they persisted with their question, He straightened up and said, ‘Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.’ 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.’

Let us deal with this passage... Its context is difficult to find, but a few hypothesis can be done on its origin and its exact place. Someone thinks the episode may come from St Luke’s Gospel, and that it may have followed Lk 21:38. In addition to that, that fact that Jesus did not condemn the adulterous woman may have aroused controversy in the earlier Christian communities, as it could be seen as a justification of adultery. Consequently, this passage was not included in the official text for some time.

In spite of all that, we see it is a provoked and provocative encounter in the Temple, occurring during Jesus’ ascension to Jerusalem for His last Passover (cf Jn 7:10): a ‘private’ ascension, “because the Jews were seeking to kill Him” (Jn 7:1). The encounter is placed between the people’s and the Pharisees’ discussions on Jesus’ origin (7:40-52) and Jesus’ self-revelation, “I am the Light” (8:12), giving rise to a fresh discussion on the validity of Jesus’ witness.

At this precise moment, in front of the Treasury, Jesus states that the Pharisees arguing with Him know neither Him nor the Father: “If you did know me, you would know my Father as well”. (Jn 8:19)

Jesus is denouncing their lack of knowledge, the fact that they are far from truth... Who is God to them, if they are unable to recognize Him in Jesus and His actions?

Let us ‘dive’ into the text... The smell of adultery pervades everything. Is the woman the only one who committed adultery or are there other adulterous people present? They are in the Treasury, but if God’s knowledge is no longer the Scribes’ and Pharisees’ treasure, there must be another nuptial covenant shattered to pieces, the covenant of Israel with their God, and another adultery, apart from the woman’s. The God of the Temple is not the Father whom Jesus is trying to reveal, but the treasury: a God one has to appease with money. The more you give, the more love you get, the more God is pleased by you and forgives you.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1-2 Introduction
- 3-6 The adultery
- 6b-8 To write down and to speak
- 9-11 Two lives facing each other

Introduction

The first lines are parallel to Lk 21:37-38. The Mount of Olives and the Temple are the two poles of Jesus’ average day in Jerusalem, corresponding respectively to ‘retreat with His own disciples’ and ‘teaching the people’. It must be noted that this is the one and only occurrence of the term ‘Mount of Olives’ in St John’s Gospel, the preferred term being ‘the garden’, which establishes a link between Genesis and Jesus’ passion and resurrection. At dawn, the text clarifies, Jesus “appears” in the Temple once again. The place where He appears is the ‘hieron’, that is, the courts. All the people gather round Jesus who, seated, teaches them. Jesus offers Himself to their sight, in spite of being aware of being at risk, and in spite of His approaching ‘hour’ He goes on speaking publicly (cf 7:27). Rejection and welcoming no longer have exact boundaries, but still His offering of His self is as usual. The Pharisees regard the crowd who listens to Him as a “rabble who knows nothing about the Law – they are damned” (Jn 7:49). In fact, “there were many people in the crowds who believed in Him” (Jn 7:31). Exactly like “many of the Jews” who had witnessed Lazarus’ resurrection (Jn 11:45). Going back to Chapter 7, when the High Priests and Pharisees realized that the people were wondering if that man could be the Christ, they sent the Temple guards to arrest Him. (cf Jn 7:32) “They wanted to arrest Him then, but because His hour had not yet come, no one laid a hand on Him” (Jn 7:30).

The adultery

In their attempt to find a way to entrap Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman along who had been caught committing adultery. Let us examine this element in order to better grasp its meaning.

They bring her along and question Him, “as a test, looking for an accusation to use against Him”. The point here is the interpretation of Moses’ Law (cf Lv 20:10). If Jesus speaks in favour of the Law of Moses, He will be entrapped. If He speaks against it, He will be entrapped as well. The question “What have You got to say?” reveals their will to accuse Him by making use of His very words.

The woman is a girl of about twelve, thirteen years of age, an age at which the wedding used to be celebrated, but bridegroom and bride actually started to live together after one year.

We infer that from the fact that if she had been thirteen or more, the ritual aimed at purifying the community would involve choking, not stoning. The term 'katalambano' refers to catching in the act of committing a crime, but it has a connotation of pre-determined hostility.

They make her stand in the middle. She is not named; she has no identity, apart from being used, being put in the middle: in the middle as the centre of attention, as the case to be discussed according to the Law; but also in the middle between them and Jesus, as the element to entrap Jesus.

Let us go further... In the whole Scriptures many occurrences of the nuptial covenant refer in fact to the covenant between God and His people. The prophets denounce idolatry, the break of the covenant on Israel's part and proclaim God's forgiveness, re-establishing the covenant.

In the passage we are dealing with, Jesus' tender humanity comes to the fore. In addition to that, the adulterous woman brought to Him becomes the symbol of Israel's adultery, the adultery of the Scribes and Pharisees who reject the Father's envoy and scheme to kill Him, but who "will die in their sins" (Jn 8:24).

To write down and to speak

Bending down, Jesus starts writing on the ground. Many suppositions have been made about that. We prefer to look at the traits of Jesus' humanity, at His way of interacting with both the provocateurs and the woman. And we try to find in the Holy Scripture the harmony between Jesus' words and actions and the Father's, "because the One who sent me is true, and what I declare to the world I have learnt from Him" (Jn 8:26). If the discussion regards God's Law, the perfect image of the Sender (who is true) can be found in the humanity of Jesus.

First of all, it must be noted that Jesus does not let others involve Him in a discussion about futile disquisitions and legal arguments. He does not get excited either, nor does He try to defend Himself. His way of interacting is different: He bends down, He makes some gestures that reveal that, on the human level, He is utterly capable of self-control in front of provocations, and He is also trying not to humiliate the woman any further. Bending down (from the verb 'kupto', 'to make a bent') is not equal to being closed. We can note that after silence and writing on the ground, He straightens up ('avakupto'), inverting His position, and starts speaking.

But what is the meaning of writing on the ground? Somebody referred it to Jr 17:13 ("those who turn from You will be registered in the underworld"), interpreting 'writing' as 'making a list'. However, keeping to mind Jr 31:31-34, Jesus' writing is the sign that a new covenant is about to be established:

“...Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it in their hearts... They will all know me... since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind”. If God’s finger wrote the tablets of the first covenant (cf Ex 31:28), Jesus’ finger is writing on man made from the soil, engraving on his heart a New Covenant and a new knowledge: from the shattered Covenant to a New Covenant, a new knowledge is given to man, thanks to God’s forgiveness. God’s finger on the dust of the soil does no longer mean ‘punishment’. (cf Ex 8:15)

When Jesus starts speaking, He inverts His position: He is at their same level and looks at them in the eyes, inviting them to carry out the execution, but also reminding them that the one who intends to throw the first stone (so big that it needed two men to be carried) must be guiltless. But who can be “guiltless”, above Moses’ Law, which in fact is aimed at revealing and denouncing sins? Then Jesus calmly bends down again and continues writing on the ground. Jesus does not answer them directly, but He seems to make them all face truth, the truth of their lives.

Who can be certain that he is respecting the Law up to the smallest detail? Who is not an idolater, an adulterous man or woman, with respect to the Covenant written on tablets? An adulterous people emerges from the discussion with Jesus in Jn 8:18-20, a people who does not know the love of the Father and who does not recognize His envoy... “For the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17).

Here and now, the God who is truth is showing Himself through His perfect image, Jesus: “They will all know me... since I shall forgive their guilt”. If God is like that, the attempt to kill Jesus is a betrayal and a mystification of the forgiving face of God. All of them are guilty.

Two lives facing each other

“When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest”, beginning with the legal authorities of the Sanhedrin (this is a clear reference to Dn 13, Susanna accused by the two elders).

Jesus is left alone by them, their entrapment has failed. Jesus alone and the woman in the middle. Two lives face each other; two lives meet in order to re-establish the broken covenant. Jesus straightens up again and speaks. A warm word, “Woman”, asking for an explanation of what is happening. “Has no one condemned you?” Jesus’ words are aimed at giving her back her dignity... She had been just a pretext to attack Him.

Jesus calls her ‘woman’, the partner of man in the nuptial covenant: this is the same appellation Jesus gave His mother, re-establishing the woman in her role, in her identity, in the covenant that she has betrayed. To Jesus, women are not things or inferior beings... And now He is talking to her in a delicate way. Where is the man she committed adultery with? Perhaps the evangelist is suggesting us that the whole people of Israel is adulterous!

Here there is the proclamation of a new covenant, as in Jeremiah, but most people are not ready to welcome Him: the accusers have gone away, holding fast to that Law which sheds light on sin, but they will never come to know God through His

forgiveness. The only one who can re-establish the covenant is the woman, after hearing Jesus say, “Neither do I condemn you”; forgiveness is God the Father’s way of letting Himself known by man, through Jesus. The New Covenant will be fulfilled on the cross and by the gift of the Spirit. The cross is joining Heaven and earth, is the bridge of a new communion; the Spirit, given to us as a gift, allows our sins to be remitted (cf Jn 20:21-23). All that is perhaps pre-figured in the non-condemnation of the woman.

Bringing to mind the discussion about this text, whose origin is attributed by some authorities to St Luke’s Gospel, we have to say that the reference to the Covenant is more explicit in Lk 22:20: “This blood is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you”. Death, that Jesus is about to undergo, will fulfil the proclamation of this new covenant.

“Go away, and from this moment sin no more.” Is that an order or a consequence of her new relation with Jesus? Is that a moral obligation or faithfulness to a newly found love, to a healed covenant? If the First Covenant, through the Law, denounced sin, the New Covenant transforms the heart, gives life through the gift of a new beginning. Now. Now, it is a beginning with no conditions, simply an encounter changing life, purifying man from various adulteries, latent idolatries, given that in the Temple, the place of man’s encounter with God, the encounter with God the bridegroom has taken place, and He calls the humankind “Woman”: He does not condemn, He renews the Covenant, He is a God who does not ‘sell’ forgiveness but who gives it as a gift. As St Augustine says, man is in front of ‘misery and mercy’.

2. Meditatio **(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)**

An encounter in the Temple, one of Jesus’ encounters and an encounter with Jesus. But which God did the accusers and the accused meet? Which God do we meet, in Jesus, in our assemblies?

- Jesus teaching the crowds shows Himself as the One who offers Himself and who offers a path of salvation, a path leading to life, where somebody else is capable of seeing just condemnation and death: with discernment and cleverness, Jesus is able to be coherent with His teaching, becoming a concrete revelation of a God who loves man always and with no exceptions. Are we scandalized by it, as it scandalized the earlier Christian communities?
- Jesus is not afraid of establishing a dialogue and a relation with the adulterous woman. He is aware that He has come to rebuild the shattered and betrayed covenant: He does not get excited, but He is delicate in that, looking at the person first, at the woman first then at her sin. Are we able to distinguish between sinner and sin? Are we able to see the deep and

inviolable part of the person, the personal ‘temple’, as distinguished from sin, which does not abolish the dignity of the person and his / her identity as a creature loved by God? How do I welcome in the ecclesial community the borderline situations? Which relations do I establish?

- The relation generates a path of rebirth: only by establishing a relation with Him, only by looking at herself with Jesus’ very gaze, the woman becomes able to start afresh: “Go”. Non-condemnation does not mean that one has to go on living in sin. On the contrary, it means that one has to overcome sin, and to celebrate life beyond death. To be gazed at with mercy in one’s wretchedness transforms it, makes one able of going out of the snare. Which kind of gaze do I use to look at the fragilities surrounding me? Do I use a merciful gaze or a condemning one?
- How do I respond to this encounter of Jesus’ in the Temple? Do I feel secure in the Temple, protected by excluding dynamics and loveless, or do I rather ask the Father that He may grant me the gift to be coherent with Jesus’ life?
- In some way, I may be similar to the adulterous woman: does the encounter with Jesus change me? Does it regenerate me? Which kind of gaze do I use to look at myself? Which kind of gaze do I feel Jesus is looking at me with?

Our Rule of Life states: *“Each of us will lovingly fulfil in her own life the mystery of the Church, so that she can be an example of the Church’s ever new relationship to the world, and may be conducive to it.*

We shall therefore be attentive to the voice of those the Holy Spirit has made the Church’s guardians. (cf Ac 20:28) We shall live in communion with them, always exchanging views and seeking advice. Together with them, we shall share the anxieties and the concerns of the ecclesial community; and we shall present them to the Lord in the liturgy.”(n° 5)

The nuptial covenant of Christ with the Church is the mystery of love that we must celebrate not only in the temple, but in all situations and events of our lives, and we must lead back to the Lord the broken covenants. Here I enclose a witness dealing with that:

Umberto and I got married, we were much in love and very happy. Together we have lived the most beautiful moments as well as the most sorrowful ones of our lives. Thus, we have discovered all the love that God has for us.

Our first encounter with God occurred when we lost our second child, Luke. The sorrow was immense, but little by little God has filled that emptiness in a way which is impossible to man.

We tried to found our lives on mutual love, overcoming difficulties together. There were no fixed roles within the family, chores that belonged to me or to my husband solely. Our son was a part of this love relation that we had built.

Umberto became also able to love my mother who was living with us, accepting her shortcomings due both to her character and to the old age. I, too, became able to accept and love my parents-in-law.

We came to realize, after many years, that by living in mutual love, by trying to pursue each other's good, we had been able to build our house on the rock. When everything seemed to be well-founded and solid, and we believed that nothing could have shattered our family, we were invested by a storm. Umberto, who used to be so transparent and genuine, was involved in a dangerous liaison, emotionally binding him.

Those were very hard times... All that we had built was crumbling, but still I loved him: I loved the person that I had come to know, what he really was. I could not throw away my past and my future with him.

He was too important for me, because I knew him well and I had to highlight that 'Umberto' that still was in him. Thus I tried to fulfil God's will everyday, overcoming all the negative feelings that assailed me: selfishness, vengeance, anger, false dignity; 'dignity', a word that allows many to feel justified in their crimes.

To me 'dignity' was something else. It meant to free myself of all that was pushing me far away from Umberto, and to believe in Love (with a capital 'L'). In that Love that makes the person whole and that makes it grow, opening the person up to others.

It was not easy, but God is always near to those who are looking for Him.

I had to be myself with all my own shortcomings and certainties. I had to be a spouse but love as mothers do. It was very hard but, following the Lord, I was becoming aware that I had to be like that. There were two people, not one, suffering because of the situation. Each of us was treading a different path to God, struggling in different situations, but trying to win the same battle. And finally, I became stronger and able to walk on my own. He, in the end, was freed from an entanglement that had disoriented him.

I had to find the highest love in order to be able to forgive him. I knew that I could utterly trust him. But if I loved him truly I had to understand that the human soul has its shortcomings and undergoes very hard temptations in the world we live in.

Our love was re-born; and the tree had new leaves and deeper roots. I understood that the word ‘forgiveness’ is a word that expresses genuine love.

Forgiveness is the way we can give ourselves to others as a gift. It is indeed THE gift given out of love.

3. Oratio **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Holy Spirit, may You make of the Church a bush burning with love for the poor and needy.

Use Your oil as a fuel for the fire. May You give Your Church both tenderness and courage. Tears and smiles. Make of her a sweet shore for all those who are sad and poor. Scatter the ashes of her sins. Burn on a pyre her greed. And when, deluded by her lovers, she comes back to You tired and repented, covered by mud and dust after walking for so long, please believe her when she asks for forgiveness.

Do not scold her but tenderly anoint the members of this bride of Christ with the oil of joy and the fragrances of Your perfume. And then, once she has no more stains or wrinkles, lead her to the encounter with Him, so that she may look at Him in the eyes without blushing and may say to Him: “My Bridegroom”.
(Monsignor Tonino Bello)

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

With the joy deriving from being called ‘Woman’, let us remain under the pacifying gaze of Jesus. Let us give thanks to Him, as He wishes to be known by us as ‘new life’. Let us attune our hearts to His wish and let us enjoy His mercy.

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

Let us share the thoughts originated by this Lectio in prayer. And let us be guided by the Spirit of mercy when we have to welcome the Sisters into our lives.