

249 Happy 80th birthday, Sybil!

Let me introduce you to ‘Sybil’, a real lady I got to know 3/4 years ago. It’s her birthday today – a special one! I’ve sent her some flowers and some chocs, but she desperately needs your prayers.

As I’ve got to know her, she’s revealed more of her story. She’s had four men in her life, the first three relationships broke down and the fourth chap died a year or so ago, while separated by distance and by Covid.

She suffered a trauma as a 12-year-old, but her mother, herself a damaged lady, offered little or no help. Then, as Sybil was bringing up five kids on her own, her mum was a drain, not a help. That constant drain continued until she died at age 94.

There’s more I could tell you, but think of her today, please. Her kids, for the sake of their own mental health, keep their distance these days, and won’t be recognising her birthday (though they might surprise her and me). Her world revolves around her dog, a lovely lady who brings her dog food, and me and another lady whom she talks to on the phone.

Yesterday, the dog had an operation, and it’s not looking good – he’s old, anyway. I have to ring her today to find out if he survived the night. Happy birthday, Sybil! Life is a bastard sometimes. [He died on her birthday morning!]

Forget the theoretical discussion about the Bible, do we have anything to offer Sybil?

We do, but how we interpret the Bible is very, very important to Sybil. She doesn’t know that, of course, as her experiences of church and Christians haven’t been good over the years. She realises I’m not condemning her, but... well, you know how (the traditional interpretation of) the gospel comes across: you’re a sinner, and until you acknowledge that, you can’t experience God’s love.

I think I might possibly(!) have mentioned John 8’s ‘the woman caught in adultery’ before, but something else occurred to me this morning. Yes, Jesus’ prime teaching point is against being judgemental: ‘Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone!’ But hang on, *Jesus was without sin*, so why didn’t he stone her? We agree that the law condemns adultery, but the law does say we should stone people who transgress.

The response I’ve had to my mentioning John 8 as a warning against literalism has been that Jesus did say ‘Go and sin no more!’ To that, I’ve pointed out^[242] that he waited until she was *alone*. And he didn’t say ‘Don’t **commit adultery**’ but ‘Don’t **sin** again’, where sin – I would claim – is whatever harms relationships.

The trouble is, we like to know where we stand. We don’t like all this wishy-washy stuff about ‘what harms relationships’. But Jesus interpreted the OT on the basis of relationships, and so must we.

To get ahead of me and find out why Jesus didn’t stone her, you could check out Greg Boyd’s *Cross Vision*.^[124–136]