The incident described in today’s gospel is less about the woman taken in adultery and more about the desire of some of the scribes and Pharisees to provoke Jesus into responding to their questioning of him in a way that will undermine his authority in the eyes of the people and perhaps even justify a condemnation of him by their religious leaders.

The account as it stands raises a host of questions. Where, for example, is the man who committed adultery with her? Did he force her physically or in some other way? Did he seduce her?

The fact that her accusers make her stand before the people as they detail their charges against her smacks of a form of cruelty that is quite merciless.

The initial reaction of Jesus to those who have brought the woman to him is surprising. Without saying a word, he begins to write with his finger on the ground. The first words he speaks shift the focus from himself to the complainants. “Let anyone among you,” he says, “who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Somewhat unexpectedly it turns out that the men still possess at least a spark of conscience. Confronted by Jesus’s reaction and by the challenge he has laid before them, “they went away one by one, beginning with the elders.”

Turning to the woman, Jesus asks, “Has no one condemned you?” He then assures her, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.”

The story underlines the compassion and mercy of Jesus as well as the hypocrisy of those who in the name of their righteousness are seeking to trap him.

As much as the incident fits into all that we know about the life of Jesus, it has obvious parallels with situations which can arise in our families, at school, at work, or almost anywhere. Human relations are often not easy, even less so during a pandemic, a time in which we are either thrown together in new ways or are isolated from one another for great periods of time. Both situations can be challenging.

In one of his parables, Jesus speaks of our tendency to find fault with others while being blind to our own failings. Take the log out of your own eye, he says, then you will be able to see the speck in your neighbour’s eye. Most of us are far more able to see the failings of others than to see our own.

The woman’s accusers are so intent on finding fault with her and tripping up Jesus that they have forgotten about themselves and their own failings and sins. When Jesus invites whoever among them is without sin to throw the first stone at her, they are all taken aback. His challenge is enough to make them stop and think about what they are doing and why they are doing it.

We sometimes find ourselves in a comparable situation. Something that someone does or says provokes us in some way. The longer it goes on, the more negatively we feel about them and we begin to complain to others about their behaviour. It may well be that even as we do so, we are guilty of a different but none the less equally insensitive action in regard to them.

When we are inclined to find fault with others, we should stop and think about ourselves and about what we are doing. The fact that the men in the story withdraw so rapidly is a positive sign. Their hypocrisy is not as hardened or as deep as we might have initially thought. The very calmness with which Jesus has reacted to their charge has had an effect on them

The story points to a traditional saying which Jesus has made his own, the Golden Rule. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” This, he adds, “is the law and the prophets.” It sums up the heart of the moral teaching of the Bible.

Clearly what the men are doing both to the woman and to Jesus is not the kind of thing they would like others to do to them. We can all think of examples in our own lives where this kind of dynamic is at work even if the issue is much less serious.

The lesson we can take from the incident is that whenever we find ourselves being excessively critical of others while disregarding our own inadequacies, we should think of the saying of Jesus about the one without sin throwing the first stone. That and the Golden Rule can help us change our attitude to others whether they be family members, friends or anyone with whom we come in contact.