

Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 4 and Mothering Sunday, Sunday 26th March
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Women and their occupations in the bible

Given that today is Mothering Sunday – it is only appropriate that this compline we look at the roles and occupations of women in the bible. Of course, major occupation in biblical times (as often now at least world-wide) is to be a full-time wife and mother. There are very few named occupations of women – Deborah the prophetess and fourth and only female Judge of pre-monarchic Israel who helped the Israelites to conquer a Canaanite king; Abishag, the concubine of the aged King David; and Lydia, the seller of purple and one of Paul's first converts. You may be interested that, in the USA, there is a movement entitled 'Biblical Womanhood' which urges women to be "a virtuous woman, serving primarily from home as a submissive wife, diligent home-maker and loving mother. No women's lib there!

We will therefore look at the lives and what is said about a number of women. Some have had a rather bad press, perhaps reflecting the very male-dominated patriarchal society of the time (and still promulgated by some religious groups). First, of course, there was Eve – whose job was to be a partner or 'help-mate' to Adam and for ever after is cast as the model temptress with the apple. Delilah – who Sampson loved – and who was persuaded by the Philistines to discover by 'pillow talk' the source of Samson's strength and then to cut off his hair so that he could be blinded and imprisoned. Jezebel – the wife of Ahab, who worshipped Baal and who persecuted all those who believed in Jehovah until only Elijah was left as the last prophet. In the new testament, Salome was persuaded by her mother Herodias to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Just weak, perhaps, and it is her mother who takes the real blame. Nothing much in any of these women in terms of role models for modern day Christians, except in the negative sense of what to avoid.

What about more positive role models. In the old testament, most women we hear of as only daughters, wives or mothers. We can start briefly with Sarah, Abraham's wife, who conceived though Abraham told God it was not possible because of their ages. Sometimes we feel we are being asked to do something difficult by God and protest "Lord – that's just not possible" – perhaps we should take a deep breath and remember Sarah and Abraham. Next comes Jochabed and Miriam, the wife and daughter of a Levite when the Israelites were in Egypt and Pharaoh had commanded all male Hebrew children to be drowned; Jochabed, having given birth to 'a goodly child' hid him for three months, then put him in a waterproof ark by the side of the river so that when Pharaoh's daughter came to wash and saw the baby and had compassion on it, the sister (Miriam) who was watching offered her mother as wet-nurse to bring Moses up for Pharaoh's daughter. And so began story of Moses and the Jewish religion. What we learn from these two women is never to be afraid to go against the ordinances of the state if they are patently unjust, and that even if you are a young child you can influence the highest in the land.

The last old testament woman I want us to consider is Ruth. Ruth the Moabite woman who refused to leave her widowed Israelite mother-in-law when the other daughters-in-law returned to their parents' home to find husbands. Ruth, who said "Where you go I will go; your people shall be my people, and your God my God (the Moabites worshipped a god called Chemosh). They journeyed back to Bethlehem at harvest time, and because they had nothing to eat, Ruth went to the fields to glean some ears of corn, and eventually married the landowner Boaz – a happy

ending. Here again we have a woman sticking with what she thought was right, even to her own apparent disadvantage at the time.

In the new testament we have four Mary's to consider. First, Mary the mother of our Lord, who gives us many things to ponder. First, the young girl found to be pregnant in a very conservative society in which such things would have been anathema. She must have been terrified. But, believing that this was God's will she not only goes along with it, but rejoices "My soul doth magnify the Lord". At the time of Christ's birth we hear little about Mary except that she 'pondered all these things in her heart'. We have Mary, the concerned and even cross mother who when Jesus goes missing on the return trip from Jerusalem, has to go back to find him; normal maternal behaviour. We see Mary with Jesus at the wedding in Cana where she shows total confidence in her son, telling the stewards to follow Jesus' instructions to fill the wine jars with water and serve to the guests. And finally, we have Mary standing at the foot of the cross with Mary, the wife of Cleopas and Mary of Magdala, watching her son being executed in the most horrific way. A life of devotion to God's will and to His Son. All three Mary's had followed and supported Jesus throughout his ministry. A fourth Mary echoes the devotion to Jesus, but her devotion is contrasted sharply with that of her sister Martha. Martha who would be applauded by the "Biblical Womanhood" movement, fussing about in the kitchen when Jesus visited and upbraiding her sister Mary for ignoring all the jobs to sit and listen to Jesus. How often are we so tied up with day-to-day concerns that we fail to hear our Lord speaking quietly to us? I'll finish by returning to Mary of Magdala. Mary, who Jesus had freed from 'seven devils' early in his ministry and who had followed him, who may be the Mary who anointed Christ's feet with the expensive perfume, and who stood with the other Marys at the feet of the cross. What I think has particular resonance for us is the very last time we hear of Mary in the gospels – when she goes to the tomb on Easter morning to prepare Jesus' body for burial and, finding the tomb empty and the body gone, stands weeping and is approached by the risen Jesus who she at first mistakes for the gardener. But it is this same Mary – a woman who at that time would not have even been considered competent to give evidence in a court – who is entrusted by Jesus with the task of announcing his resurrection to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord". What does that mean for us? It means that a life of following, devotion and service to Christ will empower even the apparently least able of us to pass on to those around us that most momentous news in history. For we also can say "I too am a witness to the RISEN Lord".