

## Lent Compline Talks 2019

### St Mary's Kidlington

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#### **Palm Sunday: The women at the Passion and Resurrection**

On the last three Sundays we considered Mary Magdalen and the male disciples to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared twice in Jerusalem. On each occasion the gospels tell us there were a number of other women present. This evening I want to look more carefully at those other women. In the male-dominated culture of the time they get scant mention, but apparently accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. Compared to other contemporary sources, the gospels contain many more references to women. But it is Jesus' words and actions that are most strikingly inclusive and contrary to the cultural norms of the time.

From our 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective we often forget how very male-dominated Jewish society then was. The daily prayers of Jewish men included this thanksgiving "Praised be God that he has not created me a woman". A woman's place was to create a hospitable home and bear children. Philo, contemporary with Jesus, taught that women should not leave home except to go to the synagogue. Generally married young women were almost entirely under the protection of a male: father, husband or male relative. Women were very vulnerable, with little access to property or inheritance except through a male relative; any money she earned belonged to her husband. A man could divorce his wife simply by handing her a writ of divorce; a woman could not divorce her husband. Adultery by a woman (but not a man) was punishable by stoning. Men were not to speak to a woman in public.

Given this context (which is, sadly, still extant in some sects such as the recent 'caliphate') we begin to realise just how radical was Jesus' approach. He spoke to women in public such as the widow at Nain who he approached at a funeral and raised her dead and only son. Jesus touched women in public to heal them, such as the woman crippled for 18 years who he met in the Temple. The women to whom he spoke recognised this behaviour as extraordinary - think of the Samaritan woman who says "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" two cultural bans defied! John records that the disciples "were astonished to find him talking to a woman". Jesus was also not worried about ritual uncleanness. At that time anyone who was bleeding or ill was considered unclean and able to transfer that uncleanness by touch. When a woman touched his cloak to be healed the fact that Jesus allowed the touch was seized upon by a Pharisee "If this man were a prophet he would have known that the woman touching him is a sinner". When Jesus encountered a crowd about to stone a woman 'taken in adultery' he said "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone".

In religious practice, women were restricted to the outer court of the Jerusalem Temple. In synagogues they were separated from the men and not permitted to read aloud. Whereas men were *required* to say certain prayers daily, women were not. Similarly, although the study of scripture was regarded as important for men, women were *not allowed* to study sacred texts. The first century Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying "Rather should the word of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman". Women were not allowed to bear witness in a religious court. Jesus broke all those rules by having a group of women as part of his travelling group. Unlike the rabbis of his day he taught women about scripture; making no distinction by gender. Matthew tells us that when someone said to Jesus that his family were wanting to talk to him he responded "Who is my mother, who are my brothers? And pointing to his followers "These are my mother and my brothers". It was the women disciples who stood at the foot of the cross

and who were first to witness the resurrection and told to carry the news to the apostles, although when they do, the men's reaction was that "their story was nonsense". Although these women become almost invisible in the later parts of the Acts of the Apostles, a careful reading shows that women played an important role in the early church - as they increasingly do today. There was Tabitha (Dorcas) in Joppa who ministered primarily to widows; Mary, the mother of John Mark, a widow who ran what we would regard as an early house church; and Lydia, a prominent wealthy woman who appears to have been a CEO in the dye industry who, with Priscilla, who ran a tent-making business in Corinth, became part of Paul's missionary team.

Some of the female followers during Jesus ministry surely rank as disciples. In addition to Mary Magdalene, Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha were very close companions and, although Martha took the traditional Jewish role, Mary "sat at the feet of Jesus listening to Him"; she was, in a very real sense, a disciple. It was women who stood at the foot of the cross. Mark says "A number of women were also present ... among them Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome; Matthew adds "the mother of the sons of Zebedee"; Luke "the women who had accompanied him from Galilee"; John names Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary, Jesus' mother.

It is Mary, Jesus' mother, who I want to focus on now. Mary is also venerated in Islam as 'our lady' (there is a mosque in Abu Dhabi named "Mary Mother of Jesus"). Mary appears first in the nativity narratives when - betrothed to Joseph - she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Jesus. Betrothal then was organised by a girl's father and Mary was probably about 13. Think about all the images of Mary that you know, whether painting or sculpture - almost without exception Mary is sitting with her son on her knee. Hence the 'obedient Mary, meek and mild' around which have grown ideas of immaculate conception, Mary's perpetual virginity (despite gospel references to Jesus' brothers!), and her bodily assumption into heaven. I suggest that Mary has been grossly sentimentalised and misrepresented (largely by male writers); that she was actually a very tough, determined lady.

First, she had to cope with a pregnancy during betrothal - one can imagine the neighbours' reaction in the small village community! Small wonder that Joseph was "minded to put her away privily". Next, when the family were returning home after their ritual Passover visit to Jerusalem and they finally locate Jesus three days later in the temple, it was Mary (not Joseph), who reproached Jesus; despite his reply that he "must be about his father's business"; nevertheless, Jesus went home with her. Early in Mark we read that, when a large crowd were mobbing Jesus, Mary and his brothers set out "to take charge of him" because people were saying that he was mad. Mary next appears at the wedding at Cana when the wine ran out; here again she takes an active role to get things sorted. She is not named again during Jesus' ministry until she stands at the foot of the cross. We cannot begin to imagine what courage it took just to be there, nor what went through Mary's mind as she watched her son being crucified and dying. Then, and after the crucifixion, Mary was clearly part of a group of very brave women who defied custom. Whether she was in the locked upper room when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples is not recorded. A suggestion that she was comes in Acts, because Mary is named as one of the group of women with the apostles and Jesus' brothers who, after the ascension, were at prayer and engaged in choosing a successor to Judas Iscariot. She may also have been part of the group at Pentecost, because Acts says "they were all together in one place". Mary is said to be buried at Ephesus where she was taken by 'the beloved disciple' to whom she was bequeathed by her crucified son. So, I suggest that we revise the "Mary meek and mild" saccharine image and think about Mary, mother of Jesus, more as a very determined lady who effectively became one of her son's disciples. We can only pray that we, who know Jesus only by faith, may also follow him in discipleship throughout our lives.