

# WOMEN AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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**A**LL REFERENCES to discipleship in the New Testament apply to women unless the text explicitly says to the contrary. The Beatitudes are addressed to women as well as to men; women along with men have ears to hear the parables of the Kingdom; the challenge, 'If you would be my disciple, you must take up your cross and follow me', is presented to all. However, women in the New Testament may serve as role models particularly for women, but also demonstrate for everyone what it means to be a disciple.

While the term discipleship means what is characteristic of a disciple, for some it is the twelve alone who spring to mind when Jesus's disciples are mentioned. The gospels and other New Testament writings are for all those who hear and respond to Jesus and it is the wider sense of discipleship that is intended here. A disciple is literally 'she who is learning', for we never cease learning what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Besides learning and its requirement of attending to Jesus and to where we are, four other activities are essential to discipleship—believing, following, serving, speaking.

Women are believers in Jesus (models of faith), followers of Jesus (models of the pilgrim way), people who minister to Jesus and to others out of that love which, as the chief fruit of the Spirit, marks the christian disciple (models of ministry) and people who make known what God is doing (models of witness). Thus, according to Mark, among the women watching Jesus at the Cross were those 'who when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him, and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem' (15,40f). These are true disciples, the first witnesses of the resurrection.

We have also made a deliberate decision not to focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although she has always held a high place in

christian devotion and is rightly spoken of as foremost among the disciples, for she first 'heard the word of God and kept it' (Luke 11,28; cf 1,38; 8,21), her very specialness makes her a hard act to follow. In any case, there is a wealth of literature about Mary as a model for discipleship.

The nature of the material, and in particular the four gospels which form the bulk of it, poses some problems for this article. Since 1970 the New Testament has been subjected to close study, especially by women, to see what it says and does not say about women in the Church. An increasing consensus is that very different pictures emerge depending on the perspective of the New Testament author, the context for which a book was written and the presuppositions of the interpreter. We have taken note of some of the literature without entering the scholarly debate and we assume the main results of New Testament criticism. Above all we have tried to listen to what the texts are saying to women today and we suggest that men should sit in silence with groups of women and allow them to interpret the key passages we mention. Often an altogether new and liberating emphasis will appear, other than which has traditionally been taught by men. This is what we must learn if the discipleship of equals is to become a reality today. We invite the reader to share our exercises in imaginative listening.

*A woman touches* (Mark 5,25-34; Matthew 9,20-22; Luke 8,43-48)

There was a woman who followed Jesus, creeping up behind him in the crowd. Jesus was busy helping someone else at the time, hurrying to the house of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, whose young daughter was dying. Well-born, bred in the observance of the law, at twelve years of age she lay dying at the threshold of womanhood, feminine, becoming skilled in women's work, an ornament to her father's household, not yet tainted by the 'uncleanness' of menstruation. So, on his way to lay hands on this pure daughter of Israel, Jesus is in turn touched by the woman in the crowd.

This woman had no business to be there at all, 'unclean' as she was, and contaminating all whom she touched in the press of people around Jesus. She was not only menstruating like any woman, 'unclean' one week in four, she had been bleeding for twelve years, for the whole lifetime of Jairus's daughter. She was constantly unclean, an outcast. Unmarriageable, untouchable, barren, she was cursed at the centre of her femaleness as her

people understood femaleness. In her they saw all that frightened and disgusted them in women, with none of a woman's compensating usefulness. So she was utterly despised and rejected of men. Mark says she had suffered much (*πολλὰ παθοῦσα*), using that verb for the only time other than of Jesus in his passion, and so linking her agony to his.

They are drawn still closer. Coming up behind him, she touched his garment, and at once the bleeding stopped. She felt this in her body. For her, the means of salvation and its coming to her are bodily, tactile, intimate; salvation experienced at the tips of her nerves, deep inside. Jesus, jostled by the crowd, is immediately aware that he has been touched in a significant way. As the woman feels her flow cease, Jesus feels that power has flowed from him; he is now drained as she was. He has taken the wound from her, into himself. As in so many stories the direct and physical recognition of salvation at hand, which is shared by Jesus and the person who has approached him, is heightened by the commonsense blindness of 'his disciples'.

The woman's approach to Jesus was covert. She came from behind, in the crowd, not aiming to touch Jesus himself, much less speak to him. She had no thought of explaining her need or asking for help. 'If only I may touch his garment I shall be whole', she thought. In this we may see her awareness of how outrageous she is being in coming thus far, and how she risks the fury of the crowd if her unclean presence were made known. But also, she knows that for her, the untouchable, to touch is enough to reverse her disease. When Jesus turns to find her, she does come forward, though trembling with fear both of a new rejection and at the power of healing she has felt. But of course he does not reject her, and she had known he would not; that is part of the faith that has made her whole. Jesus greets her with love and striking intimacy, 'Daughter'. His concern for her at least equals Jairus's for his daughter. 'Go in peace', he says, a blessing (unique in Mark's gospel) which gives peace but also affirms to her and the crowd that she is able to be at peace, and to go—to take up her life and live it. This she does, with no need for further speech or contact. She is healed, she goes on her way whole, while Jesus turns back toward Jairus's daughter.

#### *Some themes*

The story of this woman has many features which recur so often

in stories about women in the gospels that we can think of them as themes.

*Firstly*, her approach to Jesus challenges social and religious rules intended to exclude her. The rule she must break is the taboo on menstruating women; the syro-phoenician and the samaritan women are outsiders by race; the 'sinner' who anoints Jesus in Luke is socially and morally beyond the pale; the bent woman should not be healed because it is the Sabbath; Martha's sister Mary steps outside her proper housewifely role, and Mary the mother of Jesus challenged convention in conceiving him. To come to Jesus these women must 'forget their place' and put themselves at risk by doing so. They do not apologize, and Jesus frankly accepts them without reference to the rules or else supports the women by setting the rules aside. In these women's stories, discipleship begins in taking a deep breath, taking the initiative, and taking on the world.

But, *secondly*, these bold moves are made so gently. Touching his garment, pouring him a drink of water and stopping to talk while he drinks it; the exchanges between women and Jesus are intimate, domestic, concerned with touch and bodily caring. The woman who anointed Jesus shows us this. In Luke, she is a 'sinner' and an intruder at a meal, washing his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair and anointing them with precious ointment, performing, however dramatically, the familiar rituals of hospitality. In John, she is Mary of Bethany, anointing him for the burial. In both stories Jesus appreciates the love and the imagination with which the woman perceives his physical need, her braving the company's disapproval, her ministering to him with the intimacy of touch. He approves, too, the generosity of her act in which, *thirdly*, she resembles her sisters. Her extravagant giving and self-giving is like the extraordinary responsiveness of the samaritan woman at the well, of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and other women who supported Jesus, of the widow who put all that she had into the treasury.

*Fourthly*, in responding to Jesus's gift of salvation with such self-giving, these women model a discipleship of mutual ministry. Their worship is expressed as service. The women stay with Jesus at the Cross as the men do not, perhaps cannot. Women know about powerlessness, pain and blood. These women can cope because women have always had to. Made perfect through suffering they minister to him as they can.

But the ministry to which Jesus calls us is not the self-destroying servant role into which women have been cast and which they are right to reject. For *lastly*, Jesus's call to these women is to fully autonomous selfhood. He does not ask them to 'follow me' in the sense of 'leave the life you were living and your old pursuits, make my concerns yours, let me direct you'. Instead he requires them (often in order to approach him at all) to realize the truth about themselves and their situation, to approach him as they are. Doing that is the act of faith which heals them. That is, they are then able to act freely in, or away from, their circumstances. They no longer let circumstances direct them. Their new autonomy allows them to 'rename' the world, believe in their own values enough to insist on them and reshape the world accordingly. That is the power we see in the syro-phoenician woman, the intellectually confident woman, not afraid to win an argument with a man—the women whom so many people fear!

*A woman teaches* (Mark 7,24-39; see Matthew 15,21-28).

Here is a woman so bold she turns Jesus's teaching back upon himself. If Jesus's word makes all foods clean and so abolishes dietary restrictions (Mark 7,19), there is likewise no restriction on who may eat at the Lord's table. The daughters of greek women have their rights too. The syro-phoenician woman is direct and insistent; her daughter's well-being is at stake. Having heard about Jesus she comes right away, falls at his feet and asks him to cast out the evil spirit from her daughter. Met by Jesus's rebuff about feeding the children first and his racist remark about gentile dogs, she persists and will not be put off. Perhaps she had heard that the children had already been satisfied there in the lonely place when the loaves and fish had been multiplied and there was more than enough left over (Mark 6,30-44). In any case, she has got him. His illustration can be turned to her advantage; but this she does without putting him down. Children are messy eaters. She has had a child herself and knows how quick dogs are to snap up the bits and pieces that fall off the table. And Jesus graciously concedes the point. He has learned from her argument (or is it her 'word', her proclamation?) and the gentile dog becomes a human being, her daughter a recipient of his saving power as much as any other child of God.

If Jesus has indeed been taught a lesson by this woman and had his horizons extended, then there is even greater need for a

mutuality in our discipleship, for give and take. The syro-phenician woman is not only an example of persistence and nimble wit. She shows that men have to accept correction at the hands of women whose experience of God is different and wider than theirs. Men will learn how to hear the truth spoken in love if women keep on making their case boldly and gently like this one.

*Distinctive emphasis*

(a) Mark. This Gospel more than any other dwells on the surprise element in Jesus's ministry, the way in which Jesus is always overturning our human expectations: the wonder-working messiah is to be crucified (8,27-33); the first shall be last and the last first (10,31); the crucified one is truly Son of God (15,39); Jesus is not to be found where he was buried (16,1-8). Disciples have to accept what is disconcerting about Jesus and also accept as fellow-disciples those they would not expect (cf 9,38-41). Those formally designated as disciples, who do not understand either Jesus or their call are contrasted with others such as the blind, whom Jesus enables to see (8,14-26) and to follow (10,35-52).

In particular a contrast is drawn between the twelve, who either betray, deny or desert Jesus, and the women who follow Jesus to the Cross and on to become heralds of his resurrection. Mark's passion narrative is enfolded in the model response of women. At the beginning (14,1-11), an unnamed woman anoints Jesus's head at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper to prepare him for burial. Better to be remembered nameless for a beautiful deed than, having a name, go down in history as the traitor. At the end (15,42-16,8), Jesus is buried by another seeker of the Kingdom, Joseph of Arimathea. The women who remain faithful to Jesus at the Cross come to complete the burial rites, but to their amazement the tomb is empty and they receive the missionary mandate, 'Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee: there you will see him, as he told you'. The women, in awe and fear at the exposed mystery of resurrection, speak only to Peter and the other disciples, declaring that the one they saw crucified and buried is now risen. For a while, at the climax of the gospel, the women have taken the place of the (male) disciples. From now on they must become disciples together and keep on learning what it means to hear the call, 'Follow me and I will put you to fishing for people' (1,7). Jesus is ahead of us in Galilee, in the world where the Kingdom must be proclaimed,

people healed of various diseases and unclean spirits driven out (1,14f, 34; cf 3,13-19).

Three times in this gospel, Jesus speaks of his coming death and each time, because it is not understood, he spells out the connection between his way to the Cross and that of his disciples (8,31-38; 9,30-37; 10,32-45). Not only do women exemplify the literal following of the way of the Cross, they illustrate that service of self-giving which is for Jesus the model of christian leadership. The poor widow put into the temple treasury 'out of her poverty everything she had, her whole living', thus becoming the richer (12,42-44). Just as Christ increased in riches by becoming poor in order to make us rich (2 Cor 8,9; cf 2 Cor 6,10). Similarly, the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany (14,3-9) performed a costly service for that poor one, becoming his servant unbidden and, like Peter's mother-in-law (1,31), giving a cup of water without being termed a disciple (9,38-41).

Such women as these in Mark are among those whom Jesus calls 'my sister and mother' because 'they do the will of God' (3,34ff). They are also the 'sisters and mothers' of all who become Jesus's disciples (10,29f).

(b) Matthew. Much more than Mark, Matthew restricts the term 'disciples' to the twelve, perhaps reflecting the jewish character of leadership in his Church. But women play an important role in the genealogy of Jesus, they are in the crowds listening to Jesus's teaching, they continue their place in the passion narrative and they are among those of all nations who are made disciples. In particular, Matthew takes up the story of the canaanite (syro-phoenician) woman (15,21-28) to highlight his portrayal of Jesus the davidic messiah as also a light to the Gentiles (4,16) and one in whom the Gentiles will hope (12,21). She cries out, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David', and claims for her daughter the bread of Israel's God. Although the disciples want to send this outsider away, she stands her ground, claiming her rights for herself and her daughter, and like the gentile centurion (8,10) is commended for her faith. This gentile woman and her daughter also sit at table in the Kingdom, for the thrust of Matthew's gospel, 'God with us' (1,23), means that 'wherever two or three gather together in Christ's name', even women, 'there I am in the midst of them' (18,20).

(c) Luke—Acts. Women are prominent in the lucan writings, with an equal if not prior status as disciples. Thus in the infancy

narratives (Luke 1-2), Elizabeth and Mary are featured as mothers strengthening each other in their pregnancies, but are more important because they recognize the activity of God in their midst and respond to it. Through the working of the Holy Spirit they discern the hand of God in what is taking place, for Luke is quite clear that women receive the Spirit along with men. Mary and the other women are with the twelve on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1,12-2,4) and he knows of women who prophesy (Luke 2,36-38; Acts 21,8f).

To Luke also we owe two striking stories about women as disciples. Martha and Mary (Luke 10,38-42) are often taken as examples of the conflict between the active and contemplative ways. It is better to see the story as a statement about focus. Martha seems to be the elder and is anxious about her duties as hostess. Not that this work of serving is in itself demeaning or unimportant, for Jesus favourably receives such ministry to himself from women (Luke 7,36-8,3). While Luke subordinates the ministry of service to the ministry of the word (Acts 6,1-6), Jesus emphasizes his own role as one who serves at table (Luke 22,24-27). The problem is the temptation to busyness, self-pity and self-preoccupation which can overcome any servant, even ministers of the word. 'Look how hard I work and nobody takes any notice'. By doing the one thing needful and listening to Jesus's teaching, this Mary would learn that servants should not expect to be commended for doing their duty (Luke 17,7-10). We must keep our focus on the one who is the source of all we are and do.

Although the crippled woman appears passive in the story (Luke 13,10-17), had she come every sabbath for eighteen years hoping for God's re-creation, a rest from her labours? Once freed from her infirmity, this daughter of Abraham is set upright and gives glory to God, for she is fully alive. Her patience and faith are taken for granted, but her condition is what gives hope. No woman bound by shackles that deny her God-given dignity need remain crippled for life: God's direct word of address and affirming touch set her free.

However, for all this high profile given to woman in his gospel—and we have not had space to consider his fondness for parallel stories of women and men—Luke provides little evidence that he saw women having an effective ministry beyond that of responding to the word and performing charitable service. Although he strengthens considerably their role of following Jesus from Galilee to the Cross to witness his death, burial and empty tomb (Luke



23,49-24,11), in the Acts of the Apostles apart from offering their homes for the Church to gather in (Acts 12,12; 16,14f.,40), the only description of ministry by a women is that of Priscilla. With her husband Aquila, she offered hospitality to Paul (Acts 18,1-3) and instructed the learned Apollos more accurately in the way of God (Acts 18,14-26). We know also that Paul spoke highly of this husband and wife team as fellow-workers with him in the gospel and that a Church met in their house (Rom 16, 3-5; 1 Cor 16,19). No conflict seems to have been created by this team ministry of married partners, where both appear to have taken a public role.

(d) John. Unlike the other evangelists, John is concerned entirely with discipleship: with the exception of the appendix (21), there is no material restricted to the apostles or the twelve. This gospel arises from a community of christian equals, whose life flows directly from their individual relationship with Jesus and from their mutual service of love. The women whom Jesus encounters and who respond are therefore all models of discipleship. There are five of them of significance, placed at strategic intervals, opening and closing the public ministry, introducing the passion and establishing the resurrection.

The mother of Jesus appears twice. She is present at the marriage in Cana of Galilee (2,1-11), which opens the public ministry, where she takes the initiative in seeking Jesus's help because she knows who he is. Rebuffed for trying to misuse her maternal influence, she none the less summons the servants to obedience and thus paves the way for Jesus's glory to be manifest the first time. She is present also at the foot of the Cross with some other women and the beloved disciple (19,25-27), where she ceases to be seen as Jesus's mother and becomes not the mother of the Church, but a true disciple, related to the model disciple as mother because this new community of believers creates a new family. In receiving each other they receive the one who sent them (13,20), and a man and a woman together represent the new creation at the foot of the Cross.

As Rachel found a new life when the stranger drew water for her father's flock at the well (Gen 29), so the woman of Samaria is brought to believe in the well of living water through her encounter with the weary traveller at Jacob's well (4,4-42). The request from Jesus that she should minister to him (v 7) leads on to ministry as a missionary in bringing her village to the Messiah (vv 28-30, 39-42). The Samaritan woman has sown the seed by

her word and the (jewish) disciples reap the fruit of her labours (vv 35-38). Yet before this can happen, Jesus reveals who she is to herself and who he is to her (vv 16-26.,29), but only because she has taken the risk of entering into dialogue with Jesus and trusting his words, however inadequately at first (vv 10-15).

John concludes Jesus's public ministry with the story of the raising of Lazarus (11,1-54), in which the two sisters of the dead man, Mary and Martha, figure prominently. Like the mother of Jesus, these two women take the initiative in seeking Jesus's help (v 3), but they both have to undergo development in faith (vv 21f.,32). Martha receives a revelation on Jesus's part of who he is and she makes a confession of faith that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the Son of God' (vv 25-27), comparable to that of Peter's in the other gospels. But her belief in Jesus is made perfect through the manifesting of his glory (vv 39f) and so she has life in his name (cf 20,31). However, it is her sister Mary who demonstrates the perfect faith and love of the disciple in the anointing which prefigures his own act of humble service in washing the disciples' feet and which prepares his body for burial (12,1-8). This Messiah is one who must lose his life in order to bear much fruit and she is the servant whose precious ointment signifies the cost and total commitment of discipleship (cf 12,23-26).

If Mary of Bethany introduces John's passion narrative, and Mary the mother of Jesus represents disciples at the foot of the Cross, Mary of Magdala establishes the resurrection (20,lf.,11-18), though she too is at the Cross. As in the story of the woman of Samaria and that of Martha and Mary, and for that matter the story of the man born blind (9,1-38), so with Mary Magdalene there is a process of coming to full faith. She is the first to discover the empty tomb and immediately goes to tell Peter and the beloved disciple, but at this stage none of them believes in the risen one. While she is still seeking his corpse, for she will not easily lose all trace of him, Jesus addresses her by name and this sheep at once knows her shepherd's voice (10,3f). But the relationship is now different. No longer can she stay with him; she is sent to announce the good news to the others. Thus she becomes the first to bear the apostolic witness to the resurrection and her message is that of each one of us, 'I have seen the Lord'.

### *Recovering what is lost*

The stories that survive about women in the New Testament

come to us through the eyes and hands of men. They are tantalizingly incomplete. Some are reduced to mere names referred to in passing, as in the Acts (9,36., 40; 12,12) and Epistles (Rom 16, Phil 2,4f). Others are distorted by misogyny and even jealousy (Apoc 2,20-23). Many no doubt have been completely suppressed. It is a useful exercise, and fun as well, to try to recover the lost stories of women. We can re-imagine them, looking for the details that did not interest the recorders, but may show us what discipleship meant for those women then and what it means for us.

We can do that, for instance, with the tiny parable Jesus told in Luke 15,8-9. If we re-imagine this story as that of a woman seeking to take up her life and walk, as the disciples were called to do, this will not deny but extend the story as a revelation about God. God calls us to the discipleship of wholeness so that God may be whole at last.

There was once a woman who had ten silver coins. They were her dowry, but you must not think of them as just her bride-price, her market value. To her they were her birthright and a sign of her worth as a person—her self-image if you like. So she wore them as a chain around her neck, proudly, until one day she found that one of them was missing. How diminished she felt, how shamed in her own eyes as well as before the neighbours. She began to hunt for it. She swept out the house; she did not find it. She turned out drawers and cupboards; she still did not find it. But she certainly was getting the house tidy! Finally, in the last room, behind the very heavy chest in the corner, that she had hoped she would not have to move—there it was against the wall! She picked it up and polished it on her skirt and she ran outside and called to her friends: 'Come and rejoice with me, for I have found my missing piece and I am whole at last!'

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