

“Women of great faith”

Wesley Uniting Church

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Bible reading: John 12:1-8

Women had it pretty tough in Biblical times. While there were a few female leaders like Miriam and Deborah, and there are some marvellous stories of faith and courage about women like Naomi, Ruth and Esther, and there is reference occasionally to women prophets, mostly women are invisible and unnamed in the Bible. Women are largely subordinate to their husbands and fathers and brothers; in the Jerusalem temples the court of the women was well back from the sanctuary behind the “court of Israel” which was for men only; women could not be priests; and the Pharisees in Jesus’ time would pray regularly “I thank thee O God that I am not like other men and I am not a woman”.

But then there’s Jesus. Sure his appointed closest disciples were all men, sure we have lots more men named in the gospels than women, but the gospels do name quite a number of women also - Mary, Elizabeth, Anna, Mary Magdalene, Joses, Salome, Susanna, the sisters Mary and Martha, Joanna - and the gospels tell us that a group of women disciples travelled around with Jesus and the 12, and went with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem. The women were there in Jerusalem with Jesus during those terrible and awesome days of growing opposition, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

The faith of the two sisters of Bethany, Mary and Martha, and the extraordinary devotion and insight of Mary in anointing Jesus’ feet in preparation for his burial a few days later, have turned my thoughts this weekend to the women of the gospels.

Would you turn please to hymn 661? Here’s a beautiful hymn which arises from the faith of the women of the gospels, the women followers of Jesus. They’re a great bunch.

Let me run through each verse of this hymn, written by another male admirer of the women of the gospels! Verse 1 is of course Mary, Jesus’ mother. She gave birth to the one we call the Son of God, the light of the world, the prince of peace. Early in Jesus’ ministry Mary thought Jesus had gone off the deep end and she tried to drag him home, but then she too became a disciple and she was one who followed Jesus, all the way to Jerusalem.

Verse 2 refers to the unnamed woman who had suffered for 12 years from dreadful haemorrhages, who was healed when she managed to touch Jesus as part of the crowd pressing round him (Mark 5). Remember how Jesus stopped and insisted he speak with her, and she, trembling, owned up to what had happened, and Jesus affirmed her faith and her healing. Women touching a man unbidden like that was taboo, not done. Jesus accepted it, and met the woman’s need.

It’s a great pity we are not given the name of the woman of verse 3. If we knew her name, churches and cathedrals would be named after her. She’s the Samaritan woman whom Jesus engages in conversation at Jacob’s well (John 4). Her first words to him acknowledge two social prejudices “you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Through the conversation she is converted to faith in Jesus,

and very soon she has converted many others from her town. We don't know, but perhaps she is one of the women who followed Jesus to Jerusalem too.

Verse 4 speaks of the woman who anointed Jesus and loved him with her hair. In John's gospel this is Mary of Bethany (John 12). In Mark and Matthew it happens in Bethany alright, in a different house, and it's an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14, Matthew 26). In Luke it happens in Galilee, not Bethany, and it's emphasised the woman is a sinner (Luke 7). In every gospel it happens in the midst of a feast, and the woman, Mary or whoever, shows her love and devotion to Jesus by anointing him. In Mark, Matthew and John, there is recognition that Jesus' death is only a few days away and the woman knows it whereas the men cannot see it.

Verse 5 is about Mary and Martha. Remember how Martha complains that she is doing all the housework and the hospitality while Mary is lazily sitting there listening to Jesus (Luke 10). But note that when their brother Lazarus dies, it is Martha who takes the initiative (John 11). Martha goes and seeks Jesus' help, she declares her faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, she then has a fleeting doubt about Jesus' capacity to raise Lazarus from the dead when she smells the stench of the decaying body, but she still believes, and Lazarus is raised.

Verse 6 refers to the group of women who followed Jesus, on the road, on the way to Jerusalem, on the way of Christ (Luke 8). Some of them had been healed of sickness. Their support for Jesus and the 12 was vital. They provided most of the food and provisions needed by the travelling group of disciples. Joanna is especially noteworthy, as her faith and courage are very strong - her husband was one of King Herod's chief administrators which would have put Joanna in a rather tricky position, yet she still followed Jesus.

Verse 7 is a magnificent statement about the faith and devotion of the women disciples. The 12 fear they will be arrested and executed too, so they're not there at Calvary as Jesus suffers and dies. The women stay with Jesus to the bitter end, even though they think the adventure with Jesus is finished, even though they have lost hope and are in despair (Mark 15, Matthew 27, Luke 23, John 19). That's dedication, that's courage, that's love.

And verse 8 reminds us the women are the first witnesses of the resurrection. It is the women again, not the fearful men, who go to Jesus' tomb at dawn on Sunday and find him gone, resurrected, alive again (Mark 16, Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20).

Without the women of the gospels there may have been no ongoing faith in Christ, no church, no passing on of the faith to us today. The women understand when the men do not, the women are loyal and brave when the men are not, and when the men, finally, assert their social status and take the lead after the resurrection, the women stand aside and accept them. At Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection, when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit, the women are there. We're told there are 120 disciples staying on in Jerusalem (Acts 1, Acts 2) and I suspect the majority were women. Without the women Christianity may never have happened.

Today, give thanks for Mary and Martha of Bethany, see their faith and their devotion to Jesus, and with them sing praise to God that Jesus gives us life and makes us free to live again!

[Sing 661 - all sing vss 1 and 8, and all sing refrain every time. But women sing vss 2, 4, 6, and men sing vss 3,5,7]

