

# The Consequences of Being Human

*The Incarnation is widely associated with Christmas. But the Word did not become flesh for one day or season only. In these talks we consider the risk which God took in being one of us and one with us in Jesus.*

John Bell

## Wednesday: Treasured by Women

On the two previous evenings we have considered how Jesus was 'Touched by Pain' and 'Troubled by Religion.' It was very easy to trace how throughout his ministry these were controversial realities which brought him into conflict with powerful people who would ultimately engineer his demise. The death of Jesus was not the result of a quick decision, but rather the outcome of an accumulation of information about his life and teaching which posed a threat to those who were the self-opinionated protectors of God.

That the last of these addresses should concern women might at first seem irregular. But then the profile of women in Christian teaching has been irregular.

I am taken back probably fifty four years to when I was sixteen and on the Wednesday of Holy Week attended an evening service where the preacher indicated that this was one of the few occasions when the Gospels highlighted the women around Jesus. That comment never struck me as extraordinary, given that apart from the Virgin Mary and a haemorrhaging woman whom Jesus had healed, I had not presumed there were any others to talk about.

In the debates which all denominations have had about women's ordination, much of the heat and less of the light has been generated regarding what St. Paul did or did not say. Few people drew on the many females in the Hebrew scriptures who, in terms of virtue, faith and bravery outshine many of their male counterparts. Nor was there any acknowledgement that Jesus' first effective evangelist was a woman, the one he met at the well, who brought a whole village to Jesus – which is more than any of the apostles are recorded as doing.

So let us not follow our Saviour on the way to the cross without acknowledging his indebtedness to women to whom he related, often at the cost of controversy.

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

*Matthew 26.6-16*

The Wednesday of Holy Week is the day which is associated with Jesus visiting the house of Simon the Leper where a woman pours very costly ointment over his head. These two characters bear witness to the ease with which Jesus fraternised with the underclasses. Simon, as a leper, was deemed to be unclean. Therefore no respectable rabbi should have been in his company, let alone eat with him. And the woman gets close enough to touch him, if not with her hands, then certainly with her perfume. Jesus would either be squatting on the floor or lying on a couch. The unusual thing is that he is in all-male company (as at the Passover meal in the upstairs room). One of the Gospels presumes this woman is a sinner, perhaps a prostitute who would not have the sense of shame in gatecrashing an all-male assembly which a more self-

respecting Jewish woman would have had. To allow himself to be pampered by such a disreputable figure is not the kind of behaviour a respectable rabbi should have allowed; even worse is the fact that Jesus commends it.

The last two talks have involved, in their titles, the words Touched and Troubled... and both of these adjectives find resonance in this incident. He is touched by a woman and he is troubled by the reaction which that causes among the men.

I do not want to spend this time looking at the particulars of this incident. I want, rather, to draw attention to the significance of women in Jesus' ministry which stands in stark contrast to the contribution of men.

I was first alerted to this in Regina, Canada. I had been working at an all-day conference on the Saturday and, for reasons of transport, was obliged to stay overnight in the conference centre and catch an afternoon flight on the Sunday. The warden of the Conference Centre asked if I would lead worship on the Sunday Morning. It was to be half an hour long, and be all-age, and I could use whatever space in the establishment that I wanted.

For reasons that need not be rehearsed here, I suggested that rather than preach, I would like us to explore what Jesus disciples did for him. I asked the group (which included priests) to divide in two. One half was to go into a side room with a large piece of paper and write up the names of the twelve apostles and three things we knew about each of them. The other half was to go into another room with a large piece of paper and write up the names or identity twelve women who followed Jesus and three things we knew about each. ... Oh, and they were to do this from memory. No Bibles allowed.

So these unsuspecting people dutifully divided into two groups each with adults and children. After fifteen minutes I called them back. The group which was considering the twelve apostles looked rather sheepish. Even with three ordained servants of the word, they could only get ten names of the Apostles, and as for three things about each of them... ???

Well, what do we know for certain about James the Less, or Simon the Zealot? What do we know for sure about Matthew except that he had been a tax collector? And as regards the triumvirate of Peter James and John... we know plenty about Peter, much less about John and even less about James, except that he was good at arguing.

These are the people after whom cathedrals are named, and who are the patron saints of societies and nations.

The other group had a very different experience. Given that not all the women in the Gospels are given a name, they were yet able to identify twelve about whom three things were known. Several of these women, (including the one with a reputation for immorality who wipes Jesus' feet with her tears), have more verses of scripture devoted to them than seven of the Apostles.

Now we could ask why, given this disparity, the profile of women in the Gospels is not well known. Some might argue it is a male conspiracy. Men chose the texts from the lectionary and conveniently brushed out the women. Some might say it is the fault of our teaching of the young. Boys and girls are typically introduced to male heroes in the Bible rather than to female. Others might say that the fact that so many women are not given a name makes it less likely they will be talked about.

There are other possibilities, but I am less interested in the theories than in their witness. So I want to look at some of the unique ways in which women affected Jesus. And I will omit concentrating on Mary his mother, not because I have little affection for her; quite the contrary. But I sometimes feel that the high profile given to Mary has eclipsed our appreciation of the other women.

Here are some of the women involved in Jesus' life and ministry:

- A When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby stirred in her own womb. Then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed in a loud voice, 'God's blessing is on you above all women, and his blessing is on the fruit of your womb.'  
*Luke 1: 39-42*
- B Anna, a widow aged eighty-four, worshipped day and night in the temple with fasting and prayer. Seeing the baby, she gave thanks to God, and talked about the child to all who were looking for the liberation of Jerusalem.  
*Luke 2:36-38*
- C The Samaritan woman left her water-jar and went off to the town, where she said to the people, 'Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?' They left the town and made their way towards him.  
*John 4:27-30*
- D A woman who was living an immoral life... took her place behind Jesus, weeping. Her feet were wet with her tears, and she wiped them with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with myrrh.  
*Luke 7:36-38*
- E The haemorrhaging woman (who had touched Jesus' cloak) came trembling to his feet and told him the whole truth. Jesus said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace, free from your affliction.'  
*Mark 4:33-34*
- F A Syro-Phoenician woman who asked that Jesus might heal her daughter was told by Jesus, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs,' 'Sir,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps.' He said her, 'For saying that, you will find that the demon has left your daughter.'  
*Mark 7:25-30*
- G With Jesus were the Twelve and a number of women who had been set free from evil spirits and infirmities: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna and many others. These women provided for them out of their own resources.  
*Luke 8: 2-3*
- H There came to the Temple treasury a poor widow who dropped in two tiny coins, together worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'Truly I tell you: this poor widow has given more than all those giving to the treasury; for the others who have given had more than enough, but she, with less than enough, has given all that she had to live on.'  
*Mark 12:42-44*
- I Jesus said, 'This woman' (who poured precious perfume over his head) 'has done what lay in her power; she has anointed my body in anticipation of my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial.'  
*Mark 14:8-9*
- J While Pilate was sitting in court a message came to him from his wife: 'Have nothing to do with this innocent man; I was much troubled in my dreams last night.'  
*Matthew 27: 19*
- K Great numbers of people followed Jesus, among them many women who mourned and lamented over him. Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.'  
*Luke 22: 27-28*
- L The women (to whom the angel said that Jesus was risen) were Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Mary the mother of James; they, with the other women told these things to the apostles. But the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe them.  
*Luke 24:10-11*

For most of my life I have read the Bible from a male perspective. But three years ago I decided to read for a full year only the chapters of the Bible which mentioned women. At the end of that year I was astounded at how dangerously one-sided my reading of scripture had been. That, I suppose, is a long-term male prerogative.

When we come to the Gospels and to Jesus, we encounter – if we are open to it – a person whose uniqueness extends to the way in which, as a first century Jew, he enters into reciprocal relationships - not master and servant associations - with women. He has no hesitation in identifying their talents or abilities, but all too frequently in such encounters there is a man or men in the background who do not react favourably to the woman or women with whom Jesus is engaged,

I have already mentioned the woman in the well being the first evangelist, and that her meeting with Jesus is the longest recorded of any conversation Jesus has. But also in this story is a stunning contrast. She, a non-Jew, expresses interest in Jesus, and engages in deep conversation with the young rabbi. This meeting happens while Jesus' disciples have gone to get food. When they return they – who have heard him speaking about loving both neighbour and enemy - are astonished that he should be engaged in such a cross cultural encounter.

*John 4: 27-30*

When he is in the house of Simon the Pharisee, he allows a call-girl (we should name names) to wash his feet with her tears and to kiss them. And when it is suggested that he should not be allowing such a thing to happen he takes issue with his prestigious host. He contrasts her hospitality and affection with what seems like the total absence of it being shown by his male host.

*Luke 7: 40-50*

Sitting across from the temple treasury, he notices a poor woman putting two copper coins in the offering plate. Before she has done that, a number of eminent religious men have been demonstrating their largesse, emptying their wallets, writing big cheques to impress each other. But in the face of their benevolence, Jesus identifies true philanthropy in this unnamed old lady.

*Mark 12: 40-42*

In the encounter which we particularly remember on this day, a woman of ill reputation pours precious ointment over his head. This immediately sparks a reaction in either Judas or one of Jesus' other male companions, so much so that a complaint is made. Such an extravagant gesture, in the mind of the woman's accuser, is a waste of a substance which could have been sold for a small fortune and the money given to the poor. But Jesus, who is forever defending the poor against the predations of the privileged, takes the side not of the would-be charity supporter, but of the woman. He says of her what he says of no other person, that what she has done will be kept for ever as a memorial of kindness.

*Mark 14: 8-9*

But there are also individual women who are not in counter distinction to male counterparts whose lives touch his and lead him to say unique things about them.

One is the person who is known only by her illness... the haemorrhaging woman. She has always fascinated me ever since thirty years ago I was leading a Bible study with people who were afraid to talk about the Bible. We were looking at the story of the haemorrhaging woman and to try to stimulate the conversation, I laid out around two hundred photographs of twentieth century women of different ages, and asked the group of ten people that having heard the story, they might go and look at all the photographs of women and pick one which they thought might best resemble the woman who touched Jesus.

*Mark 5: 25-34*

One participant, called Margaret, had chosen a picture which I could not understand. It was of a photograph of a young woman who was running. This clashed with my image of the haemorrhaging woman who I had always taken to be middle aged and unable to move quickly. When I asked Margaret why she had chosen this image of a young, agile woman, she said: 'The Bible never mentions anything about age....So if she started menstruating when she was eleven and had been bleeding for twelve years, she could have been twenty-three. And as regards the energy, if she was going to touch Jesus, she would have had to have fought her way through a crowd who were tightly packed around Jesus.' And then, with a note of confidence, she continued 'If you were a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and this was your last chance, you

would find energy you never knew you had.'

It is this haemorrhaging woman whom Jesus identifies as a model of faith. He says as much: 'Your faith has made you whole.' (*Mark 5: 34*) But this faith has not been articulated with words; this faith has been articulated in her daring movement from the periphery to the centre, in the process of which she would know that every man she touched would become unclean... even Jesus, because women with 'an issue of blood' were forbidden by law to defile men by touching them.

This outrageous act is identified by Jesus as an act of faith.

And when we come towards the end of Jesus' life, we see the singularity of women in a different light. For despite the protestations of loyalty to Jesus made by all his male disciples, when he is about to be tried before Pilate, there is no mention of any man speaking up for him either to the religious authorities or to the state. Only one person, whose name we don't know, but who is Pilate's wife, tries to prevent the crucifixion. Only one woman, no men.

And when we come to the crucifixion, the only male disciple who is mentioned is John and his name appears only in one Gospel. But women are named in all four Gospels:

Mary the mother of Jesus

Mary of Magdala

Joanna

Salome who is taken to be the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John

Mary, the mother of the other James and Joses.

There is a very interesting contrast that when it comes to those who journey with the dead Jesus to his burial, it is the mothers of the disciples who follow him to the end, not their sons. *Mark 15: 47*

Then comes the resurrection morning regarding which all four Gospels attest that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women, and Luke records when they bring the news to the apostles the men would not believe them. *Luke 24: 10-11*

Is there any other male in human history who has had even a fraction of the impact on humanity which Jesus has had, in whose life there is clear evidence of such a positive affection for, reliance on and commitment to women which is devoid of sensual lust or stage-managed for effect?

Is there any other male in human history who has risked the credibility of all that he stood for by willingly associating himself with women who have been marginalised on account of their status, rumoured immorality or dubious past?

Is there any other male in history who has recognised and named in women the virtues of love, hospitality, faith and gratitude which he has also recognised as being ingloriously absent in men?

Is there any other male in history who, in the face of impending death engineered by jealous and threatened people, found no support in the men in whom he had chosen, trusted and confided in, but was accompanied to the end by faithful women?

And are there many men in the leadership of the church who, through the centuries, have emulated this trait which runs throughout Jesus' life; or have even dared, as he did, to compare God to a woman looking for a lost coin, or speak of himself as a mother hen longing to gather her chickens under her wing?

St. Paul is not renowned for his favouring of women, but he does manage to affirm that in Christ, 'there is neither slave nor freeman, neither male nor female.' *Galatians 3: 28*

Paul acclaims it but Jesus incarnates it.

## **Being Human**

The holding title for these three Holy Week talks was 'The Consequences of Being Human' because it is the Incarnation which continually fascinates me.

Indeed, from what evidence can be mustered, it is the Incarnation which won our nations for Christ. Pre-Christian religions in the UK held reverence and fear for a God who was above and beyond the earth, whose temperament was known by the ferocity of the weather, whose creativity was witnessed to by the beauty of the earth, but who lived in an existence remote from the exigencies of humanity. And who would not blame such a God for living within the constraints of heaven, because life on earth was treacherous? Birth was a risky business, life was dependent on good health and mobility, good harvests, plague-free cattle, and no predations of the Vikings. But if the weather or some infestation ravaged crops and cattle, if serious illness affected the body, if boats overturned at sea, if invaders came to rape and pillage, life became a risk.

And then came the Celtic (and Roman) evangelists, to say that the God who was above and beyond the passions, temptations and tragedies of life had come, come out of love, to be one of us, to take on the riskiness of life, and to confront the iniquity of those who threatened goodness by dying even for them.

Who would not want to love and live for such a God who shared as one of us the consequences of being human?

### **Points to think about:**

- **Can you think of other groups, besides women, who 'disappear' in the way we usually read the Bible? (Foreigners? Slaves? Children?) You might want to make a plan to read differently.**
- **John asks a series of questions about Jesus and women ('Is there any other male...?'). Well, is there? Can you think of positive examples of women's experience in relation to power – religious or political?**
- **We have thought about Jesus healing people, coming into conflict with religious authority, and treating women differently. We have thought about how this springs from Jesus' understanding of God. How would you describe the way Jesus exercises power? What kind of power is it?**