

## 2) ESTHER AS WOMAN

### MARKS OUT OF TEN

We looked yesterday at Esther as a stranger, an immigrant, an exile in a society to which she did not belong. And we looked at other people in the Bible who were natives of the society in which they found themselves.

Today we look at Esther as woman – a young girl in a society in which women had no role apart from showing their beauty, raising children and being in charge of the household.

Before we look more closely at her other biblical women, could we for a moment think of the country from which we come and if we were to rate it, give it marks out of ten for the equality women have with men, what mark would be give our nation – one out of ten up to ten out of ten.

### DISCUSSION

#### WOMEN IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

I don't imagine that anyone here would give women in their society the same mark as they might give to the ancient Middle Eastern society in which we find Esther.

The Jews, like other societies of their day, had very clear notions of what the place of women was. They were barred from high offices of state; they were barred from positions of authority within the religious establishment; they were barred from education which might advance their capacity to have the same career prospects as men. And they were barred from holding property of their own, or inheriting it from their parents.

The only advantage a woman had was that it was through the female line that Jewish identity was transferred. This might seem odd. Why was identity not transferred via the father, particularly when all Jewish genealogies primarily list the names of men?

The answer is simple. Jewish men could not be relied on to be faithful to their wives. Many, as we shall see, had more than one sexual partner. But it was presumed and enshrined in law, that a Jewish woman should be faithful to her husband.

This information is might be new to some. What might also be new is the fact that within the Bible, and especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are many stories of women who challenged male supremacy, who challenged the culture of their day, who even took on male roles. But relatively few of these women are well known.

#### CONVENIENTLY FORGOTTEN WOMEN

I discovered this around thirty years ago when I was invited to preach at Evensong in Westminster Abbey. I was given the readings for morning prayer as well as evensong. On looking them up, I discovered that from the Hebrew scriptures, the morning reading was Exodus 1: 1-14. The evening reading was Exodus 3:1-12.

I was curious as to why half of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 were not being read in public worship by Anglican (or Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian) churches that day. So I looked at the 'omitted' verses and discovered that these verses were primarily concerned with five women who subverted male authority.

Look at the list of women's names you have in front of you, and first of all silently read them and tick the ones whom you recognise:

Leah	Dinah
Shiphrah	Jochebed
Zipporah	Tamar 1
Achsah	Puah
Abigail	Daughters of Zelophehad
Jael	Michal
Wife of Manoa	Deborah
Rizpah	Tamar 2
Merab	Jephthah's girl
Huldah	The Levite's Concubine

Now share your score and your findings with those beside you to see if your neighbour has recognised some you did not know about.

#### DISCUSSION

There are no prizes for getting twenty out of twenty, but there is a good reason for people not having a high score. It is simply that most of these women never feature in the reading of Scripture on Sundays.

The people who devised the Common Lectionary which is used throughout the world were predominantly men. Somehow it did not dawn on them that it might be important to include in their selection of texts for Sunday worship stories about women who appear in the Bible.

Similarly in most teaching of children in Sunday school classes, the heroes of the faith are predominantly men - Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon. So children, especially girls, grow up with the impression that God has a bias towards men. Men take the leading roles, while women are the supporting cast.

This is the church culture in which I grew up and it appals me that it has lasted for so long. It appals me because if you never learn of the women whom God has called in your childhood, it is difficult to appropriate them in adult life, when - arguably - people read the Bible less.

It appals me because while there are many men mentioned in the Bible, they are not all paragons of virtue. Look at this second list of male names and discuss with each other which of these is the kind of morally upright figure whom we should encourage our sons to emulate:

Abraham	Samson
Moses	Lot
Gideon	Jacob
Jephthah	Abimelech
Saul	Joseph
Laban	Isaac
David	Aaron
Ehud	Joshua
Boaz	Samuel
Absalom	Jeroboam

## DISCUSS

Would you want your son to be like Abraham who had two wives and a concubine, or like Gideon who had many wives from whom he had seventy sons and one concubine from whom he had one son?

Or would you prefer your son to be like Moses, Saul or David, all of whom committed or engineered murder?

Or perhaps like Jephthah who sacrificed his daughter? Or Samson, who as well as playing fast and loose with women, set fire to foxes tails, and fed his parents which had come from the intestines of a dead lion?

This lack of female recognition appals me because such women as are likely to be known from the Bible generally fall into two categories – virgins and whores, women who are pure and those who are sullied.

There are precious few pure:

Mary, the mother of Jesus  
and Elizabeth her cousin are the main commonly known models of virtue.

But the women who have gone astray and lead others astray are better known

Eve,  
Pharaoh's wife  
Rahab the Harlot  
Jezebel  
The woman at the well  
The woman caught in the act of adultery  
Mary Magdalene  
The woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears.

We cannot continue in the 21st century to have such a misrepresentation of women in the service of God.

So Esther is our launch-pad for other discoveries. But before we meet her, let us sing a song which extols women.

Sing: THERE IS A LINE OF WOMEN

## WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book of Esther has 10 chapters, but the lectionary in the course of three years only allows for the public reading of 14 verses.

We know little about her past except that she was the adoptive daughter of her Mordecai. Her parents were dead and she was a Jew in Gentile society.

She is not the only woman in the book which bears her name. There are many others girls who are not named, but who vie with Esther to be the next queen.

There is a woman called Zaresh who is the wife of the dim-witted and racist Prime Minister Hanaan. She will become a widow before the book ends.

But at the beginning of the book is Vashti. She is both a beautiful and strong-minded woman who had been queen, married to King Ahasuerus. She rebelled against being a showpiece. When commanded by the king to appear in his presence wearing her royal diadem so that others could admire her beauty, she refused to appear.

This had not happened before. Parliament had to discuss the matter. And the male courtiers decided that if news of Vashti's defiance was to become public, it might encourage other women to defy their husbands and treat them with disrespect.

So there was an act of Parliament which decreed that Vashti should never again appear in front of King Ahasuerus. In her place, another woman, more subservient had to be found to replace her as queen.

So Esther appears in the public domain as an entrant to the Miss World beauty contest – for, indeed, the Bible tells us that many beautiful young virgins were brought from throughout the kingdom which, as we know, stretched from India to Ethiopia, covering two continents plus the Middle East.

The beauty contest to be the next queen was not something which Esther entered voluntarily. Rather, we are told, the servants of the king decided that she should be one of the contenders for the throne. From then on, her life was to be controlled by men.

Men had decided that there should be a new queen  
Men had organised the beauty contest  
Men choose who were going to compete  
A man called Hegai was in charge of grooming the girls – a process which took twelve months  
And when her turn came, a man brought each girl to the king to spend an evening with him and  
then return her to the women's quarters in the morning.

And the winner of the competition, the one who became queen, would not have direct access to her husband the king, but she would live in an apartment different from his and will be summoned into his presence only when he desired her.

Esther, in modern terms, may be considered to be half way between a 'trophy' bride and a sex slave.

#### SEXUAL USE AND ABUSE

The sexual use or abuse of women is a common theme which binds together over 12 of the women in the Hebrew scriptures:

Hagar was a concubine of Abraham  
Rizpah was a concubine of Saul  
The first Tamar had intercourse with her father in law  
The second Tamar was raped by her brother.  
Dinah was a rape victim  
Bathsheba was the object of David's insatiable sexual desire.  
Ruth was compelled to lie with a man old enough to be her grandfather  
Lot commits incest with his two daughters  
The Levite's concubine is left outside to be raped, ravaged and killed by other men.

No woman dared to defy or complain because under Jewish law a woman's evidence could not stand up in court. And in any case, there was a law which made it plain that if a woman were raped and no-one heard her crying out for help, it had to be presumed that she consented to sex with her assailant.

No wonder Jesus had to come.

No wonder he took issue with those who hid behind such laws. That's why we find him defending the woman caught in adultery. Her voice, her story and here violator were safe because her testimony would never be listened to.

No wonder he radicalised the understanding of the law of adultery. The offence was not simply the act of adultery. The offence began when a man lustfully contemplated a woman who was not his wife as a sexual object.

No wonder Jesus changed the practice of only men being regarded as the heroes, the models of faith and morality. It was in women that he recognised models of generosity, compassion, active faith and true hospitality.

No wonder Jesus broke the taboos that named women as unclean and not just unclean but contagious if they were haemorrhaging. He allows such a woman to touch him and congratulates her on the faith she has shown in doing this.

No wonder that when Jesus talks of God he refuses to depict God and God's work only with reference to male stereotypes. He has a parable in which he compares the working of God's kingdom like seed being scattered; and accompanies that with a similar parable about yeast being mixed into dough.

He speaks about the radical nature of God's kingdom by speaking about how men don't put new wine into old skins, and another about how women don't put a new patch on an old garment.

And when it comes for God's searching love for us, he tells the story of a shepherd who looks for a lost sheep. And with his next breath he tells the story of a woman who looks for a lost coin. These parables not only indicate God's equal interest in men and women. The last two indicate that God cannot simply be spoken of in masculine terms.

This is no new trendy theology. This is the truth of God which has been clear since the publication of Luke's Gospel. Why has it taken us so long to be able to say it out loud?

SING: MOTHERING GOD

## DISCRIMINATION

Perhaps somebody by now may have painted a contemporary picture of Jesus with a ME TOO badge on. But how sad that it is only recently that issues regarding the sexuality of women have been on the agenda of the churches.

I imagine that most people here will know of instances within the life of the churches you serve where the simple fact of being a woman is sufficient to make discrimination a reality.

For myself, I think of a church in the USA regarding the female associate pastor in a wealthy congregation. I had been invited to work with this congregation over a weekend, and after the Sunday worship service, the husband of the female associate pastor ran me to the nearest railway station.

En route he said,

'I suppose you'll know that today is my wife's last Sunday at that church'

'No,' I said, 'I was not aware of that. Why is she leaving?'

He replied, 'She was told by a group of men that they didn't want her serving as associate pastor any longer. The truth is I don't think they liked a woman in the pulpit.'

'Were any of these people who spoke to her retired businessmen by any chance?' I asked.

'Yes.... every one. They had always told women what to do and couldn't deal with that situation in reverse.'

I want to stop here for a little while and let people talk to each other about why in the 'enlightened' twenty first century discrimination still abounds.

Is it that the notion of the woman as 'temptress' inherited from Eve and Delilah still predominates?

Is it that, like the ancient Jews, women are regarded as being somehow 'unclean' by dint of menstruation? (In Anglican churches until fairly recently, women who had had a baby stayed away from the church for a few weeks and then had a special ceremony to welcome them back. This was a throwback to the 'purification' ceremony which Mary the mother of Jesus had to undergo.)

Is it that men who might happily have a female bank manager, lawyer or professor, have some inbuilt hesitation when it comes to a female doctor or pastor?

Is it because men, having been reared mostly by their mothers do not want any other female to be in a position of responsibility for them?

What do you think?

And have you not only a story of the bad treatment of women in the church, but do you have a redemptive story of good treatment?

## DISCUSSION

SING: I WILL GIVE WHAT I HAVE TO MY LORD

## ESTHER'S SCHEME

If you have read the story of Esther, you will know that she devises a scheme whereby Haman who is the racist Prime Minister is eventually exposed. He hated Mordecai, the uncle of Esther, because Mordecai would not show visible respect to Haman. So he decided that rather than make his hatred too personal, he would persuade the king that all the Jews in his kingdom were a threat to the stability of the state, and therefore they should be eliminated.

The king agreed and made a law to that effect. Haman then looked forward to exterminating Mordecai (who had previously saved the king's life). He had a gallows built around 20 metres high.

Esther, having been told by her uncle that she alone might prevent this genocide, embarks on a series of dinners to which she invites Haman and the King, and while extending lavish hospitality, tricks Haman into feeling is favoured, but also revealing to the king that her people, the Jews, were destined for annihilation even though one had saved the king's life. Haman is exposed as the racist he is and he is hung on the very gallows he built to exterminate Mordecai.

What is it she uses – is it guile, trickery, subterfuge, charm...or a mixture of all of these?

I want to look at other women in the scripture who have equally taken on powerful men and won the fight against wickedness.

Here are four stories:

The Daughters of Zelophehad  
Jael  
The 'Witch' of Endor  
Rizpah

I am going to ask you to read their stories and afterwards speak to each other about which of these women you would like to meet and what you would like to ask them.

#### HAND OUT TEXTS

Numbers 27: 1-11  
Judges 4: 1-24  
1Sam 28:7-14 & 20-25  
II Samuel 21: 1-14

#### CONVERSATION

#### FOUR FEMALE STORIES

We could discuss these four readings for a long time. They all are rich in insight and resonance. Each one gives evidence of discrimination even cruelty against the women for no other reason that they were female.

The Daughters of Zelophehad are the victims of a discriminatory law which said only male children could inherit their father's wealth and property. It is very interesting that when Moses, who must have been not best pleased with these four girls complaining, takes their dilemma to God, God is not neutral. He tells Moses to change the law. Grace changes legislation.

The 'Witch of Endor' is compromised when she discovers that the man who is consulting her is the same Saul who banished spiritualism from his kingdom. She could die – his word against hers. She could also have killed him when he was in a state of collapse'.

Jael was not so compromised. She is one of the women whom God chooses to be the means by which God deals with an enemy of the people. Perhaps the motto of her story is 'A man should not go camping with a woman he doesn't know.'

When I read this story to people who have never heard it before, often people react with disgust. What a terrible thing that a woman should cause the death of a man, even an enemy! When I reveal that I tell this story to children, especially girls, they are horrified. What I find curious is that the same people have no similar difficulty with the story of David killing Goliath.

And then there is Rizpah, a story which comparatively few people know. II Samuel is clearly not favourite bed-time reading.

Years ago I was working at a conference of 1400 young people from the Presbyterian Church in the USA. They were all aged 16-19. I had been asked to preach every evening. But I decided that one evening rather than preach, I would ask the teenagers to listen to a story they might never have heard before.

So, during evening worship I arranged for a girl with a lovely voice and presence to tell the story of Rizpah in the 1st person, as if she were Rizpah, the concubine of King Saul whose two sons had been murdered on the orders of David.

It was very moving to hear the story told from the point of view of the mother.

After the evening service the 1400 teenagers all went into small groups for the last hour of the day, and the adult leaders encouraged them to reflect on what they had experienced from morning until night.

The next morning I met several of these leaders who witnessed the same reaction. When they started reflecting on the day, boys in the group began to complain about having to listen to a story they had never heard before from the Bible, a story about a woman who demonstrated against what the king had done.

When they finished complaining, the girls in the group began to speak up and say how they were tired listening in their churches to what biblical men did.

They had never until that night realised that God had called women to do courageous things.

#### A GOSPEL STORY

But I want to finish with another story – one from the Gospel.

It has to do with how one day in a synagogue Jesus saw a woman who was crippled. This is it - as found in Luke 13:10-17

One Sabbath when he was teaching in a synagogue, there was a woman possessed by a spirit which had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent double and quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her and said,  
“You are rid of your trouble,”  
and he laid his hands on her.

Immediately she straightened up and began to praise God.

But the president of the synagogue, indignant with Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, intervened and said to the congregation,

“There are six working days: come and be cured on one of them, and not on the Sabbath.”

The Lord gave him this answer:

“What hypocrites you are!  
Is there a single one of you who does not loose his ox or donkey from its stall and take it out to water on the Sabbath? Yet here is a woman, a daughter of Abraham, who has been bound by Satan for eighteen long years: was it not right for her to be freed from her bonds on the Sabbath?”

At these words all his opponents were covered with confusion, while the mass of the people were delighted at all the wonderful things he was doing.<sup>1</sup>

Here we see Jesus at odds with the male hierarchy of his day. The president of the synagogue and his cohort of supporters may have been annoyed that a miracle took place on a Sabbath day, but they would be even more outraged at what Jesus said regarding the crippled woman.

To heal her was one thing. But Jesus goes further. He recognises and names her true worth. He calls her 'A daughter of Abraham'.

This woman was not meant to stay in the shadows, ostracised and victimised because of her handicap. This woman was meant to laugh and party, to speak and sing and be heard. She was given her true identity by Jesus. She would no longer be known by her problem, but by her pedigree. She belonged to Abraham and therefore was loved by God.

In this story, as elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus refuses to marginalise women, to avoid meeting them face to face. He does not comply to the stereotypical behaviour of men of his society.

Instead he sees in women gifts, potentials, qualities which others have failed to recognise.

Sometimes it has to do with their faith, sometimes their generosity, sometimes their ability to love, sometimes their empathy.

In the woman he healed in the synagogue, he identifies that in this woman as in all women, the image of God is present as equally as in men. Women were not objects to be used, abused, ridiculed or rejected as men determined. They were meant to be affirmed, accepted and prized as the daughters of the living God. For in them, as exemplified in Esther, God has planted great potential for a time such as this.

SING: STAND FIRM

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