

Jesus and Women

*Taken from the book of Fr. P. Ribes, s.j. "To be Like Jesus"
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In preparing these jottings on Jesus and Women for data and information, I have drawn heavily from Joachim Jeremias' book "Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus" and from some cyclostyled notes prepared by Fr. Alex Carvalho and Ammu Joseph for a Seminar on "Woman as God sees Her" held on 26.8.1984

INSTANCES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE JEWISH SOCIETY OF JESUS' TIME

- ✓ When a Jewish woman left the house she had to cover her face with two head-veils, a hair band and a hair-net so that she might not be recognized.
- ✓ Any woman who dared to go out with an uncovered face, her husband had the power, nay even the duty to put her away and divorce her.
- ✓ Rules of propriety expected a man never to be alone with a woman, nor look at a married woman or to give her a greeting.
- ✓ Women were to remain indoors and live in retirement. They were not allowed to go out of the house, nor even cross the outer door.
- ✓ In a Jewish home, the girls went always behind the boys.
- ✓ Their education was limited to learn the domestic arts of needle work, weaving, cooking and looking after their smaller brothers and sisters.
- ✓ Unlike their brothers, girls never had the right of succession.
- ✓ Girls up to the age of twelve and a half had no right to possess anything of their own. The proceedings of their work or anything they found belonged to the father.
- ✓ Women were discouraged to study the Torah.
- ✓ Women could not teach or speak in the synagogue.
- ✓ Girls – not boys - till the age of twelve were so much under their fathers' power that they could be sold by them into slavery.
- ✓ After betrothal at an early age – about twelve and a half - the father's power over her daughter was transferred to her future husband.
- ✓ The betrothed woman was already called 'wife'.
- ✓ Her new 'master' had such power over his betrothed 'wife' that he could put her away by divorce or ask her to be put to death in case of adultery.
- ✓ Children at home had the duty to respect their fathers first, then only their mothers because their mothers' first duty was to respect their husbands.
- ✓ Polygamy was allowed. In that case, the wife had to put up with concubines and live with them.
- ✓ Women had no right to bear witness in court because it was concluded from Genesis 18/15 that they were liars.
- ✓ Subject to humiliating laws about menstruation, they were considered impure and polluted.
- ✓ In the Temple, women were not allowed to enter even the court of the Gentiles.

- ✓ Segregated in the synagogue, they had to stand outside lest men got sexually distracted during prayer.
- ✓ Women were not counted for the quorum required for communal religious worship.
- ✓ The most sacred prayer of Judaism could be recited only in the presence of “ten free adult males” – not women.
- ✓ Women in communal worship could not receive blessings before and after the Torah reading.
- ✓ Women were not allowed to ask for divorce, only men could. In case of divorce, the children were always given to the Father. This brought great hardships to the divorced women.
- ✓ A woman who committed adultery had to be stoned death, not a man.
- ✓ A sect of Pharisees, called the “bruised sect” shut their eyes tight while passing women in the street and so dashed themselves and got bruises all over. They would proudly count their bruises or display their scars as medals of honour! Such conceit! Such contempt for women!
- ✓ The Jewish men were reported to say a daily thanksgiving prayer to God for not having made them women.

Comments

Joachim Jeremias in his classic “Jerusalem in Time of Jesus” concludes the chapter XVIII on “The Social Position of Women in Jewish Society” with these words:

- **“Only against this background we can fully appreciate Jesus’ attitudes towards women. The Gospels (Lk 8/1-3; Mk 15/41 and Mt 20/20) speak of women following Jesus, and this was an unprecedented happening in the history of that time.**
- **Jesus too knowingly overthrew custom when he allowed women to follow him.** He could do this because he required from his disciples an attitude towards women of complete chastity: (Mt 5/28) “Anyone who looks at a (married) woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery in his heart.”
- **Jesus was not content with bringing women to a higher plane than their prevalent state but as a Saviour of all (Lk 7/36-50) he brings them before God on an equal footing with men (Mt 21/31-32).**

JESUS’ DEALINGS WITH WOMEN IN HIS MALE DOMINATED PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

In General:

- Jesus just brushed aside sex prejudices and biases and gave women their dignity and rightful role in society.
- Jesus treated women with sensitivity, dignity and equality.

- He sets them free not only from personal sin but also from unjust social taboos, restrictions and laws.
- He himself is affectionate and gratefully accepts their signs of affection, care and concern.
- He praises their faith.
- They support him financially, shelter him and feed him.
- He breaks the Sabbath law to heal them.
- He does not respect the Law of Moses about stoning the adulteress.
- He breaks the barriers of pharisaic rules that forbade rabbis from talking to women in public.
- He ignores the rule about incurring impurity upon being touched by a menstruating woman.

Specific Cases

Reading the Gospels, we can discover the friendly, understanding and sympathetic attitude Jesus had towards women. Some significant passages are:

Mary Magdalene (Jn 11/1-44) from whom seven demons had gone out has been portrayed in a biased way by many, but not so by Jesus. Very often the Gospels have been read in a prejudiced way against women. History painted Mary Magdalene like a harlot. We have made conclusions which are not fair to women. There is not a single line in the Gospels to prove that. Yet, playwrights, dramatists, preachers and even the so-called scripture-scholars have reduced her to a whore. Not fair!

She has been identified either with the sinner-woman who anointed the feet of Jesus or with the lady who was caught in adultery. Why?! And whoever said that “seven demons” refer to sexual sins? In the Gospel language, casting out seven demons means setting a person free from a serious and complex disease.

The Woman caught in Adultery (Jn 8/1-12)

The Gospel of John offers us a very illustrative case. It reads thus:

“The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in their midst, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do you say?’ They were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him.

But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them. ‘He, who is without sin among you, may throw the first stone at her. And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones.

Jesus was left alone with the woman. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did any one condemn you?’ And she said, ‘No one, Sir!’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more.’”

When even 21st century men and women continue, by and large, to condemn and ostracize prostitutes and acquit men of all blame who use them, it’s very remarkable

that Jesus, who belonged to the orthodox Jewish community and lived as far back as the 1st century A.D., respected that woman and acquitted her.

Martha and Mary are another instance of the way Jesus dealt with women. Lk 10/38-42 reads: “Now as they were travelling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord’s word, seated at His feet.

But Martha was distracted with all her preparations and she came up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Tell her to help me’. But the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.’”

Thus, Jesus upholds the right of a woman to live her own life, even if it means veering away from the narrow path of traditional gender roles.

While Martha was fulfilling her conventional, ‘socially acceptable’ role as the woman of the house – the hostess – busy with household responsibilities, Mary chose to neglect her ‘womanly domestic duties’ in favour of mental and spiritual pursuits and she had the sanction of Jesus.

The Samaritan Woman at the Well in John’s Gospel (Jn 4/5-52) is another convincing passage. Briefly, this is the story:

Tired after a long journey, Jesus was sitting by a well on the outskirts of a village in Samaria while his disciples went to fetch food, when a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus surprised her by asking her for a drink, because Jews were not on talking terms with the Samaritans.

Jesus however carried on a quite and personal conversation with her, talking about God and eternal life. Finally, impressed with the knowledge Jesus had about her life - the fact that she had five husbands and that at that moment she was living with a man who was not married to her - she believed that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. Then, she went to her village and told her people all about Jesus.

Jesus’ disciples, when they returned, marvelled that he had been speaking alone with a woman, yet no one said: ‘Why do you speak with her?’ Finally, many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of what the woman told them.

This recorded incident is note-worthy for several reasons:

1. First, Jesus flouted convention by striking up a conversation with an unknown woman.
2. Second, he ignored the traditional prejudices against Samaritans who, for the Jews of those days, were as good as outcasts.
3. Third, he did not hesitate to talk to her about spiritual matters and spread his message through her to the people of her town.
4. Fourth, he did not comment on or condemn her lifestyle, but treated her with respect.

The above mentioned example indicates the sensitivity and concern Jesus had for women.

However, the most convincing proofs of the depth of Jesus' relationship with women are seen in the Gospel accounts of his death, burial and resurrection.

- During his passion, it was the women in his group that did far more than his chosen men – the apostles.
- From the gospel narratives, it is clear that it was the women who remained more steadfast and close to Jesus and did not desert him at his trial and at the hour of his death.
- On the contrary, Judas sold him, Peter- the head of the apostles, denied him and all the other disciples, except John, ran away.
- St. Matthew, describing the scene of the crucifixion, says, “And many women were there looking on from a distance, which had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him.”
- Even after his death, when Joseph of Arimathea sought permission from Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to bury Jesus, “the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how his body was laid, then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes” to anoint Him.
- Again, it was the women who, after the Sabbath went early to the tomb to anoint him with the spices they had prepared.
- As a reward for their love and loyalty, it was to the women that the news of the resurrection was first made known.
- It was they who broke the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples.
- Furthermore, it was to Mary Magdalene that the resurrected Christ first appeared.

It is obvious that Women enjoyed a special relationship with Jesus among his Followers

1. He respected them as persons.
2. He instilled in them a sense of self-worth.
3. He was sensitive to their needs, problems and aspirations.

EXERCISE ONE: New Testament Texts on Women and Jesus

- Read the texts.
- Reflect on the way Jesus dealt with women in various situations.
- Had you been a woman in a similar situation, how would you have felt towards Jesus?
- Pray to Jesus to make you a little more like him in your dealings with women.

Woman with flow of blood	Lk 8/40-56
Syrophenician woman	Mk 7/24-30
Woman who anointed Jesus before his passion	Mt 26/6-13
Simon's mother-in-law	Mk 1/29-31
Widow's mite	Mk 12/41-44
Widow of Nain	Lk 7/11-17
Sinful woman anointing Jesus' feet	Lk 7/36-50
Women supporting Jesus	Lk 8/1-3
Women at Calvary	Mk 15/40-41
Women and the Empty tomb	Mk 16/1-11
Mary Magdalene at the tomb	Jn 20/11-18

EXERCISE TWO: Personal Reflection(*Examination of conscience a fantasy*)

1. In fantasy, exchange places with some women you meet or deal with in your daily living.
2. Get under their skin and - so to say – try to feel as they feel about the way you treated them or dealt with them.
3. Pray to Jesus to make you more like him in your dealings with the women whom God has placed close to you in life.

Question Yourself:

A) Were you a woman –any woman?

- How would you feel in the way you deal with her/them?
Loved, cared for, respected, appreciated, listened to, supported, encouraged, wanted, understood, taken advantage of, used, taken for granted, despised, etc.
- Can you improve your attitude towards them and be more like Jesus ? How? What will you do?

B) Were you your mother.....?

- How would you feel in the way you deal with her?
Loved, cared for, respected, appreciated, listened to, supported, encouraged, wanted, understood, taken advantage of, used, taken for granted, despised, etc.
- Can you improve your attitude towards her and treat her as Jesus would? How? What will you do?

C) Were you your mother-in-law....?

Same questions as above.

D) Were you your wife....?

Same questions as above.

E) Were you your sister....?

Same questions as above.

F) Were you your woman employee....?.

Same questions as above.

G) Were you a colleague woman?

Same questions as above.

H) Were you your maid servant....?

Same questions as above.

J) Were you any of your inferiors

Same questions as above.

