

The Women in Luke's two Books

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In the four Gospels there are remarkable moments for women. Perhaps the event of deepest significance is the anointing of the Lord's feet at the Pharisee Simeon's meal before the Last Supper. All Gospels include it, each in its way: it might be a good start to compare these briefly.

Mark (14: 3) makes his the gateway to Christ's Passion, at Bethany where Lazarus, Martha and Mary live, and also 'Simeon the Leper'. The focus is the alabaster jar of costly ointment — and it immediately precedes Judas betraying Jesus for money. Jesus has this to say, in view of his imminent death and burial: 'She (unnamed and undescribed) has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial.'

Matthew too (26: 6) takes this Bethany event as his gateway to Christ's Passion. The ointment or 'costly perfume' is poured upon the Lord's head at table. Simeon and the disciples ask: 'Why this waste? It should have been sold for the poor.' Jesus replied: 'What she has done for me is a charitable work beyond mere almsgiving. . .and she was preparing me for burial'.

John echoes the others but is more specific. He sets the event as six days before the Passover, at the house of Lazarus, who is the host in Bethany — celebrating his being raised from the dead. Indeed he thereby attracted as much interest (and political envy) as Jesus. Martha characteristically waits upon them. Mary comes in bearing a pound of pure oil of nard to anoint the feet of Jesus, filling the house with the scent of the ointment. And so Judas, the Apostles' keeper of the common fund from which he helped himself, asked why such a valuable ointment might not have been sold for the poor. Jesus responded mysteriously: 'The poor you have always; but not always me. She had to keep her scent for the day of my burial.' These three Evangelists have indicated the same principle as in the Virgin's Immaculate Conception — a foreordination. Beforehand benefits from the post-Passion: Christ's death gives full meaning to what in time precedes it.

Luke, the doctor and fond friend of women, handles the same event much earlier (7: 36) and quite differently. He has just told of the town of Nain where a dead man, the only son of his mother, and she a widow, was raised en route from his coffin. Luke speaks of the Lord here — it is the first time in the Gospels that Jesus is given a title hitherto reserved for God. The Lord said 'do not cry' and then gave the restored man to his mother, as the mourners declared 'God has visited his people' — an opinion that spread through all Judaea. The Pharisee's meal event is equally followed by an account of the women of Galilee who underwrote Jesus on mission. The

meal involved not Mary of Bethany (a saintly figure throughout), but a woman who had a bad name in the town (what town?). Luke's account is the most emotionally powerful of the four, referring to forgiveness as the reward of offered love. The Lord's burial is not in focus here, nor the Judas idea of selling the ointment. Jesus asks just this: 'Who will love the more?', replying: 'the one who is pardoned the more.'

The Third Gospel and Luke's Acts are together more sensitive and compassionate towards women than the rest of the New Testament — although there are remarkable moments for women in all the Gospels (some overlapping, though telling the same tale differently). All have accounts of women at Calvary or at the empty Tomb; Matthew writing of 'the same women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and looked after him.' John rather coldly records: 'Near the Cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister... and he said: 'Woman...'

Mark gives us the widow's mite, various cures, and the raising of the daughter of Jairus — 'Talitha, cum!'. Matthew gives us the woman in the crowd touching the fringe of the Lord's cloak; the mother of Zebedee's sons begging the top slot for her boys; Pilate's wife declaring 'I have had a dream!'; and the wise and unwise bridesmaids. John gives us Cana: 'Woman, my hour is not yet'; the woman at the well telling Jesus: 'you have no bucket!'; the (doubtful) adultery adage; and the house of Bethany, severally.

Luke is more elaborate. In his set-pieces the phrase 'Filled with the Holy Spirit' appears often, through into Acts indeed. It is Luke who tells us that whoever blasphemes against the Spirit forfeits forgiveness. For him, Jesus is the pre-eminent Saviour of all; and with that Christ is eight times recorded as in prayer. Angels populate this Gospel: the Angel of Agony, comforting Christ in the Garden, is Luke's — and so are the Lord's awesome words: 'The Son of Man will declare himself in the presence of God's angels.' Luke's greatest set-piece, the Infancy Narrative, suggests he has a call on the Blessed Virgin's witness as Mary-Mother. Those first chapters — unlike Matthew's male-orientated version — focus on Mary and her older cousin Elizabeth, who declares the Mary-title *Theotokos*¹ at the Visitation (unique to Luke); and on Anna of the Temple witness, who 'came by and spoke of the child to all who look forward to the deliverance of Israel'. In the Basilica of Mary Major at Rome hangs even today a painting supposedly of the Virgin by Luke — who therefrom merits being Patron of Painters! Notice that in Acts 16: 11 Luke becomes present as 'we' and it ends with Paul and Luke proselytizing the new Rome community.²

We should now find a Lucan set piece to show forth the Doctor's way with women. First let us recall the descriptive part of the Bethany meal (7: 36) where Jesus is challenged by the Pharisee for not knowing the woman's reputation — for holiness should judge better. 'She waited behind the Lord at his feet, weeping, her tears falling onto his feet. With her hair she wiped away those tears. She covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with ointment from her alabaster jar.' Simeon reckoned that — as a prophet —

¹ 'How am I honoured by a visit from the Mother of my Lord?' *Deipara*, or God-Bearer; *Dei Genitrix*, or Mother of God. The word was taken up by the Greek Fathers, as a devotion.

² c.f. Acts 28: 16, 'on our arrival in Rome'.

Jesus should know what woman was touching him. Jesus responded: 'You poured no water: she poured her tears, wiping my feet with her hair and covering them with kisses, anointing them with ointment. Her many sins must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love. He who shows little love has little forgiven.' The woman then went in peace, changed.

A different set piece shows Luke's view of crippled women (Luke 13: 10): he tells it thus. 'Jesus was teaching in a Galilean synagogue. A woman was there who had been possessed by a spirit for eighteen years, perhaps that was half her lifetime. She was left enfeebled, bent double and quite unable to stand upright. Jesus, perceiving her, called her over and he laid his hands upon her, saying 'Woman, you are now rid of your infirmity.' At once she straightened up, glorifying God. It was on the Sabbath day and the synagogue official counter-argued. Jesus, who had healed her, said: 'This Woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan held these eighteen years; was it not utterly right to unbond her indeed on the Sabbath?' His adversaries became confused, while other people were overjoyed at the wonders he worked. We should add this from elsewhere (6: 18) that 'Great crowds from far afield came to hear Jesus and to be cured of diseases. Those tormented by unclean spirits were equally cured. Everyone was trying to touch him — because of the spiritual power coming from him that cured them'.

The Fourth Gospel begins with mighty words: *In principium erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum*. The Revised English Bible puts it thus: 'In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God's presence; and what God was, the Word was'. This was before time, when the Son of God had being: 'Before Abraham, I AM.' Nothing of women. The Matthew Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: nothing of women. The Mark Gospel begins with John the Baptist, and a Trinitarian event: 'Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptised in the Jordan by John. He saw the heavens break open and the Spirit descend on him, like a dove. A voice from heaven said: "You are my beloved Son in whom I take delight." At once the Spirit drove him to the wilderness...and angels attended to him.' Luke's Gospel begins with Zechariah: 'His wife, named Elizabeth, was also of the priestly descent'; and continues thus: 'Elizabeth, well on in years, conceived. In her sixth month Gabriel was sent by God to a Nazareth girl betrothed to Joseph, a descendant of David.' From that moment Mary is centre stage, experiencing a Trinitarian event: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you; the holy child born to you will be called Son of God.' Thus follows the Visitation, involving fathers, mothers and sons-unborn. Mary is last seen in Luke's Acts (1: 14) directly after the Ascension, in a Jerusalem Upper Room — 'in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus' with eleven Apostles and the Lord's cousinage. Was she present at Pentecost? None knows.

Luke tells us that the sons of the cousins Elizabeth and Mary grew to maturity, one in the wilderness and the other 'filled with wisdom and God's favour.' In the Nazareth hidden life, Mary stored everything in her heart. Luke goes on to say: 'Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness...[then] with the power of the Spirit within him, he taught in the Galilee synagogues.' Luke (4: 16) tells us that 'Jesus came to Nazareth's synagogue on the Sabbath day as he regularly did' or, 'as was his

wont'. From that, we may imagine years of home life shared with his mother, Joseph having died. .

It is Luke who tells us that the Lord proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom throughout Galilee, accompanied by the Twelve 'as well as certain women cured of ailments and evil spirits' (8: 1-3). He named the Magdalene (cleansed of seven spirits), Joanna of Herod's household, Susanne 'and several others who provided for them out of their own resources.' These we might call The Galilee Team, whose houses would become available for teaching, doctrinal development, emerging liturgy (particularly the Eucharist) and later protection. As we do today for long-distance walkers and cyclists, they would provide evening reception for missionary groups, including the Lord who, we are told, was humanly subject to over-work, and in need of feeding.

Luke reminds us at the hour of Christ's death that among those who saw the whole scene were included 'the women who had accompanied him in Galilee'. He tells too of the *via Dolorosa* that a large crowd followed — 'and of women too, who mourned and lamented for Jesus.' The Talmud records that Jerusalem noble women had a practice of offering compassion to condemned criminals. At that moment, Jesus responded authoritatively: 'Daughters of Jerusalem weep rather for your children. For soon people will be driven to say, 'Blessed are the breasts that have never suckled.' He was referring to the AD 70 destruction of the Holy City. The Galilee women followed the virtuous councillor Joseph, who provided the tomb and the shroud for the body of Jesus; and Luke records of the women: 'they prepared spices and ointments...', and later they found that Joseph's stone had been rolled from his tomb's entrance. So it was they, Magdalen, Joanna, Mary, an Apostle's mother, and other women, who reported the empty tomb to the scattered and unbelieving Eleven.

All Gospels give the Galilee women the credit for establishing the Lord's tomb as empty of all but angels. Matthew's angel told them: 'Be not afraid; find him in Galilee!' Luke tells us: 'The women who had come from Galilee found the body of the Lord Jesus gone. Two men in brilliant clothes suddenly appeared at their side. Terrified, the women lowered their eyes. They remembered the Lord's Words — that he would rise again on the third day.' But the Apostles would not believe any of them. 'Peter however went running to the tomb. He bent down and saw the binding cloths but nothing else; he then went back home, amazed at what had happened.' Luke then tells the Emmaus story, involving Cleopas and himself: it ends with the Eleven saying: 'The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon'. How right the several women witnesses were!

John's Gospel gives to Mary Magdalen a marvellous resurrection story: her cry of 'Rabbuni' in the garden, with the Lord's reply, *Noli me tangere*, 'touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father and yours, to my God and your God.' With its two endings, the Fourth Gospel has only that as to the Ascension. Matthew has nothing. Mark's closing two lines — which, old as they are, may not have been written by him — tells that the Lord 'was taken up into heaven, and took his place there at the right hand of God.' Luke affirms the Ascension in both his Gospel and his Acts, the latter proceeding to 'continuous prayer, together with several women including Mary the Mother of Jesus.'

A last word from Luke's Acts of the Apostles (16: 11). At the Latin city of Philippi on the Sabbath, by the river used for ritual ablutions, Luke was among those who preached to the women who had gathered there. One was a devout woman, Lydia — who may now stand for all in Acts. Luke tells this: 'She listened to us, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. After she and her household were baptised she sent us an invitation: If you really think me a true believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home — and indeed she would take no refusal.'

Thus it was. Paul ended his later letters, for example Colossians, thus: 'A greeting in my own handwriting — PAUL. Greetings to my dear friend, Luke the doctor...and to Nympha and the Church which meets in her house.' For the next two centuries until Pope Sylvester built a basilica, all church gatherings and liturgies were held in the women's houses.

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