

Women in Jesus' Earthly Life

ELISABETH BEHR-SIGEL

¹ Among the latter are Athanasius, Gregory the Theologian and, though debated, Gregory of Nyssa; for a discussion of Nyssa's position see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2d ed., Chicago, Open Court, 1995, pp. 122f. Those who distinguished "image" and "likeness" included Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*, V,6,1), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*, II,22), Origen (*De principiis*, III,6,1) and Basil (*Homil. in Ps.* 48, 8; *De Spiritu Sancto*, I,2). G.B. Ladner believes the distinction is of Gnostic (Valentinian) origin; cf. "The Philosophical Anthropology of St Gregory of Nyssa", *DOP*, Vol. 12, 1958, p.63n11. Regarding the distinction in the Fathers, see Thunberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-29.

² Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979, p.67.

³ *Oratio XXXVII in Matt. 10:10*, 1-12.

⁴ Cited by E. Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, tr. S. Bingham, Redondo Beach CA, Oakwood Publications, 1991, p.90.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New York, Penguin, 1964, p.236.

⁶ On these ministries see Eva Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy: Women and the Church*, Minneapolis, Life and Light, 1987; and *Saints and Sisterhood: The Lives of 48 Holy Women*, Minneapolis, Life and Light, 1990. Two of the most notable disciples were the sisters Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38); Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1) may also have accepted the call to discipleship after being healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Among the first women apostles were Mary Magdalene, Junia, Prisca, Apphia, Nyumpha, Marianne, Fotini and Thekla; there is also St Horiaioele, who was commissioned by St Andrew, the first ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, to continue his work. Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) was the first deaconess, but we have a clearer understanding of the ministry of the deaconess from the account of St Olympias by St John Chrysostom (*PG*, Vol. 52, pp.549-623; cf. Kyriaki FitzGerald, "The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess", in T. Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981, pp.75-95). Among women missionaries are St Nina, who evangelized Georgia, and St Verena, who evangelized Switzerland and Germany. Women prophets mentioned in the New Testament include Anna (Luke 2:36) and the four daughters of the evangelist Philip (Acts 21:8f.). The most notable example of a woman convener of a council was the Empress Irene (Nicea 787); Eudoxia and Pulcheria had leading roles in the events which led up to Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) respectively. A noted woman defender of the faith was the Empress Theodora, who played a crucial role in the restoration of icons in 843. Two "ammas" or spiritual mothers — Sarah and Synkletika — are included along with the spiritual fathers in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Gerontikon* (*PG*, Vol. 65, pp.420b-428a). Benedicta Ward includes in this category Amma Theodora, a woman who was said to be consulted by many monks; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Kalamazoo MI, Cistercian Publications, 1984, pp.82-84.

⁷ Emilianos Timiadis, "The Concern for Women in the Orthodox Tradition", *Diakonia*, Vol. 12, no.1, 1977, p.19.

⁸ Sec. 28; for the complete text see *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol. 18, no.3, March 1989, pp.36-42.

⁹ Cited by Kyriaki FitzGerald, "Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis: Observations and Concerns for the Church in America", in T. Stylianopoulos, ed., *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988, p.111.

From the beginning to the end – from the stable of Bethlehem, to Golgotha, to the garden on Easter morning – women are present in Jesus' earthly life. This is the witness of the gospels. Uncommon in terms of Jewish customs of the day, the presence of women, including some of dubious morals, among those closest to the Galilean rabbi was striking for his contemporaries. Jesus' adversaries, the Pharisees, criticized him for it, as is seen in the story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought to him (John 8:2-12). It discredited him in their eyes. His disciples as well were astonished when they found him in conversation with a woman, who was also a Samaritan and thus considered a heretic (John 4:27).

Jesus allowed himself to be touched by women: by the woman with a haemorrhage, who was considered impure (Matt. 9:18-22); by the woman who had sinned, who covered his feet with her tears and kisses (Luke 7:36-50). He gave in to the moving pleas of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). From Galilee, a group of women accompanied him who "had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities" (Luke 8:2). Among these women, one is always named, while the names of the others differ in the different gospels: Mary called Magdalene, "from whom seven demons had gone out", an intimate friend of Jesus, who would be the first to see the Resurrected One.

The gospel texts which recall the Lord's numerous relationships with women created a problem for later Christian commentators. They thought to resolve it by covering what would normally be disreputable with pious intentions, thus justifying these dubious associations. The miseries of women – illness, impurity, ignorance, sin – are supposed to have called forth the Saviour's infinite mercy. These women represented humanity, totally lost without him. Male human beings, on the other hand, were chosen to be his apostles, to represent him and to proclaim his message of grace.

Does such an interpretation, which bears the marks of plain old androcentrism, stand up to an honest and rigorous examination of the New Testament texts? Does it correspond to Jesus' intentions as they are revealed there?

* * *

The first thing to note is that although Jesus relates to quite a few women, he never speaks to them as a separate group, characterized by vice and perhaps also by certain specific virtues. He never denounces the faults usually ascribed to women: weakness, frivolity, coquetry, sensuality, excessive emotionality. Nor does he exalt feminine virtues. Jesus does not exhort women to be obedient and submissive, as is proper for them. He does not speak of feminine tenderness as opposed to masculine toughness. Dare I say that Jesus is not interested in *Woman*, but rather in *women*, in each of them as he meets her personally. He enters directly into dialogue with each, deducing her needs and endeavouring to respond to them. To women just as to men, to each one personally, he addresses the message of grace, the invitation to enter the kingdom of heaven, which is brought near to them in him. He does not see women as a "breed", a category of dangerous and despicable beings. In the words of the Protestant woman theologian France Quéré: through his behaviour towards women, "Jesus broke with the myth of Eve as having brought sin into the world, as a woman, and having passed on her evil spells and her guilt to all female posterity."¹

The Son of God made man is fully human. The one who inaugurated his ministry by attending the wedding at which he changed the water of human joy into the wine of the kingdom of heaven does not despise sexuality. Jesus is not unaware of the reality of differences between the sexes, but for him women are not limited to their sexual role. As humans they are, like their male partners, beings endowed with speech: *persons*. God speaks to them. According to the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, at the anthropological level, the revolution brought about by the gospel "is the advent of the person, as opposed to the species simply as a whole, and as opposed to the ecstasies of union".²

* * *

The gospels evoke the relationships of Jesus with various women: brief, dazzling encounters, or long, peaceful friendships where the decisive word suddenly breaks in, such as Martha of Bethany's confession of faith (John 11:27). Jesus touches the bent-over woman, and she stands up straight (Luke 13:10-17). To the widow of Nain he gives back her only son (Luke 7:11-17). A force, an "energy" goes out of him and he cures the woman with a haemorrhage who has dared to touch his cloak

(Matt. 9:20-22). Jesus takes the woman caught in the act of adultery away from the Pharisees who claimed the right to judge her (John 8:1-11). Each time, the miracle – healing, liberation, forgiveness – is accompanied by a saying of Jesus which reveals its deep meaning. These sayings proclaim the restored dignity of these women as daughters of Abraham the faithful, and direct them towards a new life: "Take heart, daughter: your faith has made you well" (Matt. 9:23); "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11). "Go in peace" – or, to translate it more exactly, "Go *towards* peace", peace in the sense of the fullness of life in the kingdom of God (Luke 7:50).

Between Jesus and the women who have accompanied him from Galilee a truly intimate relationship is established. Mary Magdalene bears witness to this. She recognizes the risen Christ – the master and friend who now looks *different* – simply by the tone of his voice when he calls her by her name, "Mary". From this supremely personal encounter, as the "monk of the Eastern Church" has written, "an emotion shines into the world, which still gives us life".³

Several of the women who followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry obviously came from well-to-do circumstances. They were economically and morally independent. Jesus does not send them back to their husbands. We can guess that they provided for the Master's material needs. Thanks to them, the Son of Man had shelter and food, and did not need to envy the birds of the air. However, as illustrated by the case of Mary Magdalene in particular, the role of these women was not limited to that of patrons or housekeepers. They were Jesus' disciples and friends. When he was arrested and condemned to death, they remained faithful to him. Not one of them betrayed him. When the disciples scattered and ran away, except for the one "whom Jesus loved", the women remained with Jesus and his mother, "near the cross", communing with the Crucified One in his suffering (John 19:25). Though trembling with shock on seeing the empty tomb, they obeyed the angel's command to go and tell the news. "Apostles of the apostles", they are called in the Byzantine liturgy – the first messengers of the resurrection.

Though capable of courageously taking the initiative, these women believers normally behaved in accordance with the Jewish-Hellenistic social customs of their time. Martha and Mary of Bethany, in whose home Jesus was a familiar guest, served him according to the rules of hospitality of their society. For them, this service was not at all humiliating. Did not their master call himself the servant of all? While accepting their service, Jesus nevertheless did not confine women to house-keeping, cooking and serving at table. He praised Mary when she left these duties to her sister and sat at his feet like a pupil – a student of the

Torah – being taught by a rabbi. Can we not see Mary of Bethany as the patron of modern women students of theology? Even so, however, Martha the housekeeper is not disdained. It is with Martha that Jesus has the conversation which culminates in her confession of faith, a confession in every way comparable with that of Peter, chief of the apostles. When Jesus proclaimed his Messiahship, Martha replied: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:27).

Other women also have profound dialogues with Jesus. Far from being passive receivers of grace, they are awakened by their encounters with him to their own thinking and faith, and are called to be among Jesus' witnesses in the world. Upon the revelation of “Jesus' mysteries”, they become important and active agents. It was to a woman, the Samaritan whom Jesus met at the ancient well of Jacob, that he entrusted the revolutionary secret of the “worshippers... in spirit and in truth”. She then brought this message to the inhabitants of the city of Sychar (John 4:1-42).

The irony-laden dialogue between Jesus and the foreign, “pagan” Canaanite woman, who answers him tit for tat, leads to the revelation of Christian universalism, beyond the borders of Israel. Admiring the magnitude of her faith, Jesus exclaims, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (Matt. 15:28).

A woman is at the centre of the slightly differing accounts in Mark, Matthew and John of the anointing at Bethany. Who is she? Mary of Bethany, or Mary Magdalene, as some scholars suggest? Or another unknown, anonymous woman? In fact, the historical identity of this woman is not important. What is essential is the meaning of her gesture.

On the eve of Passover, on his way to celebrate it in Jerusalem, where he will, as he knows, meet his death, Jesus is at table. The ceremony of the meal is disturbed as he receives from a woman the priestly anointing which, particularly in the context of Matthew's gospel, serves to consecrate him as king of Israel and at the same time foretells his death (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). The unknown woman (or, in John's account, Mary of Bethany) breaks open an alabaster jar and pours upon Jesus a “perfume”, a very costly “ointment of nard”. This extraordinary gesture is not understood by the male disciples. On their petty calculations, this is nothing but a waste, to no purpose. They rebuke the woman: the money she has spent could have been given to the poor. Jesus alone understands her. They are united in a deep communion, the woman and the suffering, victorious God. “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9). In these words we can discern a sort

of mysterious correspondence with the “in remembrance of me” of the institution of the eucharist.

Have the churches preserved this exhortation and meditated on it sufficiently? Has the perfume of this gesture filled our entire house, as the gospel of John says it did in the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus?⁴

NOTES

¹ France Quéré, *Les Femmes de l'Evangile*, p.13.

² Olivier Clément, *L'Œil de Feu*, p.18.

³ Archimandrite Lev Gillet, “Jésus lui dit Marie”, *Contacts*, no. 100, 1977, p.4.

⁴ A full account of Jesus' relationships with women would of course also have to include his mother Mary. To exalt the Mother of God by pushing her poor sisters back in the direction of Eve the temptress, by whom came sin and death, is to falsify the meaning of the scriptures and ignore the words of Jesus, who saw his mother as the image of the true disciple, the prototype of those “who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21; 11:27-28; cf. 1:45; 2:19). But to speak of Mary together with the other women would require another exposition. Cf. E. Behr-Sigel, *Marie et les autres femmes* (in preparation, Catholic Theological Faculty, University of Lyons).