

The title of this series is "The Jesus The World Sees", and there seems no doubt that the world of Jesus' day was perplexed, astonished, and even angered by the company that Jesus chose to keep close by Him. For as far as His choice of friends was concerned He did not act as most expected a Jewish rabbi in His position to act. A fact that was really obvious as far as His treatment of women and another group that was labeled as sinners was concerned.

For instance the women of that time were seen as having a place in Jewish society that was quite rigidly defined. Although respected and valued for their role as mothers, they were always treated as subservient to men. They kept out of sight when visitors came, served the men in the family before they themselves would eat, managed all the chores including the heavier ones like collecting water, and walked while the men rode. Ralph Gower in "The Manners and Customs of Bible Times writes(p58)

"If Joseph had taken the position ascribed to him by many artists, of walking beside a donkey that was carrying Mary, he would have been the laughingstock of His contemporaries".

And as far as religious teaching was concerned it was accepted that women were not to be instructed in the law and neither were they to be spoken to or acknowledged by a teacher or Rabbi if they happened to pass each other in the street. In synagogues they were only allowed to sit with the children in an upper area separated by a grill so that they could not be a distraction for the men below.

Now we do not need a fantastic knowledge of the New Testament to realize that Jesus interacted with women in a way that was quite different to that of other Rabbis. He sat at a well and had a deep spiritual conversation with a woman, and what's more she was a Samaritan and an adulteress! He encouraged Martha to do what her sister Mary did and to sit at His feet and learn from Him. He noticed the women around Him and the children as well as the men. He called out the woman who touched the hem of His garment and was healed. He congratulated a Gentile woman whose daughter He healed for her determination and Faith, and He praised the widow who dropped the smallest of coins into the Temple treasury. Jesus again and again gave women a focus in society that others refused them.

And this was very much the case with a group of women that accompanied Him and His disciples on His preaching missions to the villages and towns in Galilee. A group that Luke makes a passing reference to in chapter 8:1-3

***8 After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,
2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases***

Now in those days it was expected that a rabbi such as Jesus would travel around with a group of disciples, or learners with Him. Even John the Baptist had such a group. They were there to support Jesus in whatever way they could and to learn from Him. But to suggest that women could accompany a Rabbi was unheard of and yet these women who had been so blessed by Jesus were travelling with Him. Not in any immoral way but as supporters of all He stood for.

And their presence with Jesus is supported by the word of God as a good and precious thing with Luke even telling us the names of three of them, all of whom owed Jesus a life that had been healed or released in some way. So Luke mentions

: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Mary Magdalene was so called because she came from a place called Magdala. Through the years she has been given by some who have no respect for Scripture, the name of being a former prostitute, and some have even sought to contrive a romantic connection between her and Jesus, but neither the Scriptures nor secular historical records support or even suggest that either of these claims had even a possibility of being true.

What we do know is that she was released by Jesus from the burden of 7 demons and that her gratitude towards Him changed her life from then on. We also know that she was at the cross, followed His body to its burial, and was present with the other women at the tomb on the day of the resurrection, and was the first person that Jesus appeared to.

Joanna was also with the other women at the tomb and she as the wife of the manager of King Herod's household would have been a lady of some wealth and standing. Susanna is a lady that is only ever mentioned here.

The point that we must not miss is that these three ladies were part of a large group of women that travelled with Jesus and helped to support His ministry out of their own means. This doesn't mean that they went along to do the cooking, cleaning and dishes like unpaid servants. These ladies had sufficient wealth to be able to pay for the expenses that Jesus and His disciples incurred as they went from village to village proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom. They accompanied Him as business partners who were pleased to use their resources to help Jesus and His disciples do for others what Jesus had already done for them.

And Jesus was pleased to allow such to happen. Others would have been shocked by this, and I'm sure that even the disciples at first would have been troubled by the place that Jesus gave to women. But in that very religious and male dominated society they saw Jesus including the women in His teaching and ministry. Preparing them for what

lay ahead. And when the church began they followed the lead that Jesus had given them.

In Acts 1:12 following the ascension of Jesus we read that the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, and the eleven names are listed, and then v14 says:-

¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

These women included I'm sure, those who had travelled with Him and supported Him and they became part of the 120 believers that are mentioned in Acts 3:15 as meeting together before Pentecost and then on the day of Pentecost itself. These women had as much value as anyone else in that early church and we read later of others just like them.

Of Lydia who it seems was instrumental in the formation of the church in Philippi. Then in Acts 18 we read about a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila who were able to instruct an aspiring preacher, Apollos, in the correct doctrine of the Faith. And the interesting thing is that in the early references in Scripture to this couple it is always Priscilla who is named first suggesting that Priscilla was more active in Christian work than her husband. Much later one of the Church Fathers, Chrysostom, stated "***that it was Pricilla's careful expositions of 'the way of God' (Acts 18:26) that proved so helpful to Apollos.***"

In Romans 16 we find Paul commending a whole list of believers who were important to the church and to him, and he begins with the name of the woman who was probably the carrier of Paul's letter to the Roman church. Romans 16:1-2

16 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (deacon) of the church in Cenchreae. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.

The word deacon in the church became a technical term for those who served in a leadership capacity and this woman obviously did that very well.

He then continues in v3 ***Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.***

Then again in v6 ***⁶ Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.***

And in v7 ***Greet Andronicus and Junias, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.***

Junias is a female who, as a believer suffered prison for her Faith. Her Christian belief pre-dated that of Paul , and the mention of being outstanding among the apostles suggests that her and Andronicus were either part of a group the church called 'apostles' in the sense of messengers or preachers sent out, or were two people who were outstanding in the opinion of the 12 Apostles.

Then in v12-15 ***Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.***

And again in v15 we find mention of a woman called Julia and the sister of Nereus whom Paul sends greetings to. The point is that Paul greets 26 people here who are all important in some way in the church at Rome and ten of them are women.

Since then it would be fair to say that the church has not always honoured the position of women as it should. The abilities freely given by the Spirit have at times been buried by the church as an organization, simply because they were not recognized as available for both male and female.

There has also always been, and still is the danger that the church neglect the controlling say of Scripture and allow the miss use of spiritual gifts by both male and female.

But what we must hold on to firmly as believers is that Jesus came to an age where women had few rights and He openly included them in His teaching, in His service, and in the ministry of the Kingdom. The way He treated and encouraged women was revolutionary for His time.

He encouraged all who would follow Him to respect one another in Christ Jesus and to encourage each one, male or female, to find their salvation and their full potential in Him.

So as we go from this place let me encourage you to think particularly of women who you know, or know of, who are seeking to use their gifts and abilities for Jesus. Whether they are in volunteer or paid situations. On the mission field, in churches or schools, in Bible colleges, or in para-church situations like Charmaine in Cambodia. Some of them may be having it tough. All need to know that they have the prayers and support of the Body of Christ.

Focus this week on how God can use you to impact one such women in a Christ-like way. Maybe through a card, a phone call, a prayer, a conversation or a gift.

Let them know through your caring how much Jesus delights in them and in their ministry for Him.

