

Affirming the Worth of the Girl Child

SERMON · Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life · 20 November 2016 (the Sunday for the Girl Child)

Mark 5:35-43 (Mark 5:41 quoted)

Genesis 1:26-31

Genesis 2:18

Exodus 15:21

Judges 4

Ruth 4:18-22

Esther 4:14

Luke 1:30-31

John 4:26

John 11

Luke 13:10-17

John 8:1-11

Romans 16

There cannot be a better time than the period we are passing through to deliberate on the theme, ‘Affirming the Worth of the Girl Child’, as the Church of South India is celebrating today as the Sunday for the Girl Child. This subject is not an easy one to preach on, for two reasons: first, the diversity of cultural views and practices around the world, and especially in our own country and among almost all communities, now stands at its highest point. We hear and read passion-driven debates about the rights, and otherwise, of girl children and women almost daily, with no one agreeing with anyone. The second reason is that it is difficult to find direct references to the worth of the girl child in the Holy Bible, while there are clear pointers to the worth of women in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. After all, it is girl children who grow up into responsible women; our deliberations today will therefore follow the biblical perspective on women from Genesis through the Old and New Testaments.

In a relatively small number of societies in our world, women are given dominant roles, with lineage traced through their ancestral line — indeed an honour bestowed upon them. The most relevant case in point is that the genealogy of Jesus Christ is traced, in Luke’s Gospel, through the lineage of the Virgin Mary — a longstanding and widely held tradition, though neither Gospel states this outright — while Matthew traces it through Joseph, despite Joseph not being the biological father of Jesus Christ.

In far too much of the world, women are viewed as lesser in value, even as children of ‘a lesser god’. While the birth of a male child is the cause for great celebration, in many communities the birth of a girl child is frequently attended by gloom. From her birth, a girl is considered little more than the property of the male members of her family. She may be neglected, underfed, undereducated, given no opportunity to express her own views even in matters concerning her, abused, or even sold as property. Her primary significance as a person, her very identity, is derived from her relationship with the male members of her family — father, brothers, husband, or sons. Her value is associated with her ability to bear a child, particularly a male child, and her life and future appear to lie in the hands of men.

Having said that, the promise of a better life for women is now in sight, with opportunities for education of their own choosing, and financial independence through work in fields that, until now, have been dominated by men. The call from this pulpit, then, if I may borrow from what Jesus said, though in another context, is His word to the daughter of Jairus: “Talitha cumi”, which is, being interpreted, “Damsel, I say unto thee, arise” (Mark 5:41) — the same word, addressed to a little girl. Paraphrased for our purpose today, the call is this: little girls and women, Jesus wills that you arise and assert. The future belongs to you; you are of great worth to society, and to Jesus, and that has been the will of God from the very beginning of creation.

The two questions we need to find answers to are these: how does Jesus view the girl child and the woman? What is her value in His eyes? Let us look briefly through the Old and the New Testaments to find answers to these questions, and try to understand His will for the role of women in the fulfilment of His eternal purpose.

My presentation on women in the Holy Bible is by no means exhaustive, but indicative. Named women in Scripture are considerably fewer than named men — how much fewer depends on the translation used and the method of counting, with published estimates of named women ranging from under two hundred to just under three hundred, against a great many more named men — and beyond these there are, of course, a great many women who go unnamed, referred to only in groups or within parables.

Genesis

As the creation account in Genesis records, the woman is a creation of God (Genesis 1:27; Mark 10:6; 1 Corinthians 11:12), lovingly made in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). She was created as an equal partner and helper for man, ‘an help meet for him’ (Genesis 2:18). God blessed the woman He had created (Genesis 5:2), and gave her equal authority with the man over the other living creatures He had fashioned (Genesis 1:28-30). As God saw the woman as part of His creation, He saw that she, too, was good in His eyes (Genesis 1:31).

God ordained roles for women

We then see the value God places on women revealed in the roles He ordained for them, at crucial moments in the history of humankind, for the fulfilment of His eternal purposes. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was called by God as a prophetess and leader

during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt (Exodus 15:21). Deborah, a prophetess, was chosen by God to lead the Israelites into victorious battle against the Canaanites (Judges 4). Ruth, a Moabite woman, established herself in Israel's history by becoming an ancestress of King David (Ruth 4:18-22). The Jewess Esther was providentially raised up to become queen in a land of exile, in order to deliver God's people from destruction (Esther 4:14).

The role women played in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ

The record of the New Testament is just as illuminating of the ways in which women were used as instruments of God's purposes in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God's favour towards the young Mary was dramatically pronounced by an angel, who announced that she would give birth to Jesus, God the Son (Luke 1:30-31). After His birth, the elderly prophetess Anna, present at the infant's presentation at the temple, spoke of Him 'to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem' (Luke 2:38). During the terrifying hours of the crucifixion of Jesus, when the earth shook in agony, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children faithfully stayed to attend their dying Lord (Matthew 27:55-56). After His death, it was the devoted women disciples who followed to the place where His body had been laid. They returned with spices to anoint Him, and were the first to discover that He had risen from the dead (Luke 23:55-56; 24:1-6). Theirs was the joy of being first to announce the message of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, a message that would forever change the course of human destiny!

Jesus offered equal status to women

If how one treats others corresponds to the value one places upon them, then the way Jesus treated women during His life on earth is telling. As He travelled with His disciples through Samaria, Jesus showed His regard for a Samaritan woman at the well by engaging her in conversation, a conversation that eventually revealed His identity as the Messiah (John 4:26). Despite His disciples' surprise at His conduct, and the woman's less than circumspect reputation, His actions spoke plainly: the Samaritan woman was worthy of hearing and receiving the truth, and of sharing it with others in her community. Remarkably to those who watched, this woman mattered to God the Son. Jesus showed respect and concern for women in a culture that frequently relegated them to a secondary, even menial, status. His relationship with Mary and Martha, for example, is reflected in His concern for them at the death of their brother, Lazarus (John 11). It was, perhaps, this same Mary who anointed our Lord's feet with costly perfume and wiped His feet with her hair (John 12:1-

3); when Judas objected to what he took to be her extravagance, Jesus defended her act of devotion to her Lord (John 12:7).

Jesus' concern and compassion for women

Another telling glimpse of Jesus' awareness of, and concern for, women is given in the Gospels' record of how He laid His hands upon a woman bent double for eighteen years and healed her, releasing her from her bondage, to the indignation of the ruler of the synagogue who witnessed it (Luke 13:10-17). In Luke 8, an older woman with a twelve-year history of bleeding is healed on the way to raising Jairus's young daughter from death, one healing enfolded within the other (Luke 8:40-56). Even a woman about to be stoned by the religious leaders of the day was treated by the Son of God with concern and dignity, rather than condemnation (John 8:1-11).

Women in the early Church

The New Testament writers record that women, alongside men, were called, gifted, and empowered by God for a diversity of ministries within the early Church. Throughout Paul's letters we find nineteen women mentioned, several of them commended for their labour in the ministry of the newly planted churches — the greater number of them named together in a single chapter (Romans 16), with others named at Corinth, Philippi, Colossae, and elsewhere (1 Corinthians 1:11; Philippians 4:2-3; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2; 2 Timothy 4:19,21).

Conclusion

Yes, friends: by His consistently compassionate actions towards them, and by His willingness to include them in His life and ministry, Jesus revealed again and again that women were created as daughters of God, and are intended recipients of His love and of His redemptive work. That being so, it is appalling that the birth of a daughter is greeted with disappointment in so many parts of our world, while Jesus our Lord rejoices in the life of every girl-child who is born. Over this past year, I have observed how committed our little girls are — taking a lead in the reading of the Scriptures and in the choir, making our services more meaningful and, I am sure, pleasing to the Lord. Accept my affection and respect, offered in all humility, to all the little girls and women present here today. May Jesus help us, as individuals, as families, and as His Church, to value this special creation of God. Amen.

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