

Women as Change Makers

SERMON · Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life · 10 September 2017 (Women's Sunday)

Mark 5:41 (quoted)

Genesis 1:26-31

Genesis 2:18 (quoted)

Exodus 15:21

Judges 4

Ruth 4:18-22

Esther 4:14

Romans 16:1-12

There could not have been a better time than the present to deliberate on the theme, ‘Women as Change Makers,’ as the Church of South India is celebrating today as ‘Women's Sunday.’ This subject is not an easy one to preach on, for the very reason that the diversity of cultural views and practices, all around the world and especially in our country, and amongst 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. However, in the Holy Bible there are clear pointers on the worth of women in the mission and service of Jesus Christ. Therefore, our deliberations today will follow the Biblical perspective on women from Genesis through the Old and the New Testaments.

In far too much of the world, women are viewed as lesser in value, even as children of ‘a lesser god,’ a fallacious notion. 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 opportunities to express her 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, whether fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons.

Having said that, the assurance of a better life for women is in sight, with opportunities for affordable education of their choice and financial independence through work in almost all the fields up till now dominated by men. Therefore, the call from the pulpit, if I may borrow from what Jesus said, though in another context, should be ‘Talitha cumi,’ which is translated, ‘Damsel, I say unto thee, arise’; paraphrased for context, the call is: ‘Little girls and women, Jesus wills that you arise and assert, and be the change makers.’ The future belongs to you; you are of great worth, precious to Jesus and to society, and that has been the will of God right from the time of creation.

The question we need to find an answer for is how Jesus views girls and women, and how that understanding might translate into our considering women as equal to men in every respect, and giving them the reverence and honour they richly deserve.

My thoughts on women in the Holy Bible are by no means exhaustive, but indicative. Published counts of named women and men in Scripture vary considerably between sources, depending on translation and counting method; but by any reckoning, women are heavily outnumbered among the Bible's named figures, alongside many further women who go unnamed, or appear only in groups or in the parables.

Genesis

As per the creation account in Genesis, the woman is a creation of God (Genesis 1:27; Mark 10:6; 1 Corinthians 11:12), lovingly made in His very 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 so created (Genesis 5:2), and gave her equal authority with the man over the other lifeforms that He had fashioned (Genesis 1:28-30). As God saw the woman as a part of His creation, He valued her as good in His eyes (Genesis 1:31).

God ordained roles for women

Then we see the value God places on women as revealed in the roles He ordained for them for the fulfilment of His eternal purposes, at crucial moments in the history of humankind. 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 the ancestress of King David (Ruth 4:18-22). The Jewess Esther was sovereignly ordained by God to become queen in a land of exile, to deliver His people from destruction (Esther 4:14). Interestingly, in the Holy Bible women are so honoured that two books, Esther and Ruth, carry their names as their title.

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

The record of the New Testament is just as illuminative of the ways women were used as instruments of God's purposes in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God's favour with 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). During the terrifying hours of the crucifixion of Jesus, when the earth shook in agony, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee faithfully stayed to attend to their dying Lord (Matthew 27:55-56). After His death, it was these devoted women who followed to the place where His body had been taken. They returned with spices, and were the first to discover the empty tomb, that He had risen from the dead (Luke 23:55-56). 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 on them, the way Jesus treated women during His life on earth is also revealing. As He travelled with His disciples through Samaria, Jesus demonstrated His value for a Samaritan woman at the well by engaging her in conversation, which eventually revealed His identity as the Messiah (John 4:26). Despite His disciples' surprise, and the woman's less than circumspect reputation, His actions spoke clearly that the Samaritan woman was worthy of hearing and receiving the truth, and of sharing it with others in her community. Amazingly to those who watched, this woman mattered to God the Son. Jesus demonstrated respect and concern for women in a culture that frequently relegated them to a secondary, even menial, status. For example, His relationship with Mary and Martha is mirrored in His concern for them at their brother's death (John 11). It was, perhaps, this Mary who anointed our Lord's feet with expensive perfume and wiped His feet with her hair (John 12:1-3). On that occasion, when Judas objected to her extravagance, Jesus defended her action of devotion to her Lord (John 12:7).

Jesus' concern and compassion for women

Another meaningful glimpse of the awareness and concern of Jesus for women is provided in the Gospel accounts, in how Jesus laid His hands on a crippled woman and healed her, releasing her from her bondage, to the indignation of those watching. In Luke 8, both a young girl who has died and an older woman with a twelve-year history of bleeding are the focus of the compassionate Son of God, the one healing telescoped into the other within the same narrative (Luke 8:40-56). Even a woman who was on the point of being stoned by the

religious leaders of the day was treated with concern and dignity by the Son of God (John 8:1-11).

Women in the early churches

As recorded by the New Testament writers, women, along with men, were called, gifted, and empowered by Jesus for diverse ministries within the early Church. Throughout Paul's writings, we find mention of nineteen women, several of whom were commended for their help in the ministries of the newly planted churches (Romans 16:1-12).

Conclusion

Yes, friends, by His consistent and compassionate actions towards them, and by His willingness to include them in His life and ministry, Jesus revealed time and again that women were created as daughters of God, and are intended recipients of His love and redemptive work. In the past two years or so, 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, which I offer in all humility, to all the little girls and women present here. May Jesus help us, as individuals, as families, and as His Church, to value this special creation of God. Amen.