



WOMEN

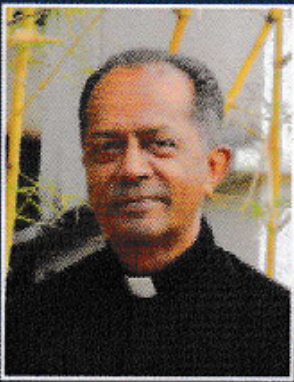
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

DR. MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

WOMEN

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The New Testament bears witness to the unprecedented heights of dignity to which Jesus raised women through his deeds and words. The present book is a sequel to The women in the Old Testament. After a brief presentation of the Bl. Virgin Mother, whom her son, Jesus, called woman, 20 women characters are analyzed in detail, 18 from the gospels and two from the Acts. The list is not exhaustive, only representative. The lives of these great women disciples would serve as examples of the transformation resulting from an encounter with Jesus and would function as source of inspiration to discipleship and evangelization. The two tragic characters, Herodias and Salome, her daughter, however, would provide a caution against an uncritical canonization of women in general.



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Dr. Michael Karimattam



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INTRODUCTION

During the time of Jesus the status of woman in Israel was equivalent to that of a gentile slave. She was expected to live in the shadow of the man at all times. When young, she was to be submitted to the father; after marriage to the husband and if the husband dies to the son or the nearest male relative of the husband. She never had a life of her own. The father chooses her life partner and settles her in marriage. If the husband decides that he does not want her anymore, he sends her out. Only the husband has the right to divorce. The woman was considered solely responsible for the tragic circumstances of infertility and widowhood.

As a rule, the woman's place was within the four walls of the house or in the back of the house. When they went to worship in the synagogues and temple they were segregated and allowed only to the special places set apart for them. Crossing the boundary was unthinkable and counted as a serious offence. They had to cover their heads and the assumption was that decent women would keep their heads covered even inside the house.

Women were not expected to study the Law; they were however obliged to observe the prohibitions. No respectable rabbi would admit a woman as a disciple for studying the Law. Women were not allowed to talk or pray in public. All they could do was teach their children at home but not anybody else. Talking to other men in public and unveiling their head in public were offences serious enough for divorce. All these were accepted as the norm. It is necessary to keep in mind this social reality of the time when approaching the study of the women of the New Testament.

The words and deeds of Jesus were revolutionary for they went totally against the prevalent understanding of the Law and the social and religious codes and practices. He taught that men and women are created in the image of God and that all human beings, as children of God, are equals, and therefore should be respected and valued. This new message of liberation pulled down all the barriers that divided humans into various classes, and put them all, both men and women, on an equal footing. All, especially the poor and neglected, received special care and concern from Jesus.

Since women were the most marginalized, Jesus showed a special respect and consideration towards them. He did not hesitate to engage in long conversations with women, in public, even with the ill-reputed, as we see in the gospel account of his dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (Jn 4). Scandalizing to the righteous was his open appreciation and praise for the love of the sinful woman who came into the Pharisee's house, fell at his feet with a contrite heart and great hope (Lk 7:36-50). Disregarding critical eyes, he justified her saying that she fared better than the hypocritical Pharisees. Many women including those who were liberated of demonic possessions, healed of illness and converted from sinful ways became his disciples (Lk 8:2,3).

Such revolutionary actions of Jesus created great ripples in the society. The "new way" is depicted in the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and Epistles, nay all of the New Testament. Jesus, God incarnate, the Word that became flesh, is the Savior who presented himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life. There were many women who accepted Jesus as the Lord and Savior and followed Him faithfully.

Of the many women who appear in the New Testament, 21 are presented in this book. The list starts with the greatest of all women, Mary of Nazareth, whom Jesus her son addressed twice in public as "Woman", pointing to her role in the history of salvation as the New Eve. About many of the women who appear in the New

Testament, especially in the letters of St. Paul, we know nothing other than their names. The following names appear in the letter to the Romans: deaconess Foiba who served in Kengre; Mariam who worked hard in Rome; Eunice, a relative who was in prison with St. Paul; Tryphosa who laboured to spread the Good News; Julia, mother of Rufus who was like a mother to Paul also and sister of Nereus (Rom 16,1-16). the daughter of Jairus whom Jesus raised to life; the women who came to see Jesus on the way to Calvary; the mother of Mark who opened her house in Jerusalem to Jesus; Rhoda who guarded the door; Tabitha who was restored to life through the prayers of Peter, the slave girl who was freed of an evil spirit at the intervention of St. Paul in Philippi are some of the other women mentioned in the New Testament.

The 21 characters were selected because they are portrayed with some details in the Bible and highlight certain aspects of the biblical understanding of women. Their lives give us an idea of the influence Jesus had in society and of the changes he brought about. Elizabeth who contrary to common practice praised God loudly, Anna, the prophetess at the temple and the powerful evangelizers such as Lydia and Priscilla are examples of the liberation Jesus brought to women.

These characters point to the prominent place women enjoyed in the early Church. Basing on some of the remarks and instructions given to particular churches in special contexts, there is a general tendency to consider St. Paul as degrading women and considering them only as second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. This however is a misinterpretation of the texts, taken out of context and generalization of particular instructions meant for specific situations. The characters presented in this book would prove these assumptions untrue. When Bible verses are taken out of context, and time-bound directives are presented as permanent laws, it is a gross misinterpretation of the Bible, denying the very love and freedom Jesus came to proclaim.

From the women characters presented here, certain important insights can be gained about the vision of God in molding the

person of the woman and of the mission Jesus entrusts them with. Each one depicts a different aspect of evangelization and each has a special message to the society and to the Church today. This book is a sequel to a previous publication titled “Women in the Old Testament

1

MARY THE WOMAN



Various titles of honour have been attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus by devout Christians throughout the centuries. But the one name by which Jesus addressed his mother in public was woman. The title of this article takes inspiration from Jesus address. At Cana and Calvary, two decisive moment sin the life of Jesus, Mary was present at His side and was addressed as “Woman”. By

this Jesus is calling our attention to Mary’s role in the history of salvation. She is presented as the counterpart of the woman who succumbed to the temptations and led humanity into sin. Contrary to the first woman, Eve, Mary the “Woman” remained totally faithful to God and actively participated in the redemptive work

Only very few data are available in the bible about her life. The epistolary literature has practically nothing to say about her. In the Book of Revelation there could be seen an allusion to her in the image of the woman clothed with the Sun. Acts of the Apostles mentions her just once, as sitting in the midst of the community waiting in prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit(Acts 1,14). Among the gospels Mark mentions her once as coming with the

brothers of Jesus to meet him (Mk 3,31-35), and at another time the people of Nazareth mention her as the mother of Jesus, whom they know well (Mk 6,3). John mentions her twice, first at Cana, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that revealed his glory (Jn 2,1-13) and then on Calvary where that glory was fully revealed (Jn 19,25-27), both times Jesus called her Woman, implying a deep theological insight about her soteriological role as the New Eve. It is in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke that we find the bulk of the material about Mary in the NT. There she is presented as the virgin from the inconspicuous village of Nazareth whom God chooses to be the mother of His Son to be born as a man. The limits of this article do not allow us a detailed study of the Blessed Virgin Mary whom the Church proclaims as the Mother of God, assumed into Heaven body and soul, thus anticipating the resurrection of the body promised to all. That would need a separate volume for itself. Here we are trying only to highlight a few important points concerning the Blessed Mother.

Mary was chosen by God for a particular purpose, namely to be the mother of the Redeemer. God prepared her for this lofty vocation in a special way. The angelic salutation, "full of grace", points to the particular favour she received from God. The Church in a dogmatic proclamation explains this special favour as "the Immaculate Conception". Mary was preserved from sin, not by any merit of her own, but by God's grace, in view of the merits of Jesus. She is the representative of the people of Israel who was specially chosen by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. In Mary God started the immediate preparation for the new creation, She was also the first human being in whom the fruits of the redemption was manifested. Thus she becomes the representative of the new humanity and the first fruit of the redeemed human nature.

Mary considered all that she was and all that she had as a gratuitous gift of God. Her heart and mind were fully turned towards Him. She was totally immersed in the divine presence and permeated by the Spirit of God. When Mary speaks of herself, she thinks only about the things God has done in and through her.

All the generations call her blessed because God has done great things for her. The “mighty deeds” of God, of which Mary spoke in her hymn, refers to the Redemptive act of God. She rejoiced in God’s love and proclaimed His work of Redemption with joy.

Mary was totally receptive and submissive to the Word of God. The response, “behold the handmaid of the Lord be it done to me according to thy word”, is representative of her entire life’s attitude. She may not have been fully aware of the implications of the call she received at the “annunciation”. The call to be the mother of the Redeemer was indeed a unique privilege but the price she had to pay for that call was no less exceptional. As time passed and the call became more and more clear to her, she must have shuddered with horror, because she was to be the mother of the one who had come to take the sin of the world upon himself. Many a thing she did not understand, but she listened to the Word of God, treasured it in her heart and kept meditating upon it.

The call was a gratuitous gift, but she had to become worthy of it through a life of faith and suffering. The moment she opened herself to the work of the Spirit, she entered upon the dark path of faith. Nobody would understand her. She had to believe that what was impossible to man was possible to God. Right from the moment of conception all the way to the crucifixion of her son, Mary had to grope in the dark, living by faith. That faith had to pass many an acid test. The utter poverty at the birth and the total dereliction at the death of her son are but two remarkable instances. Like Abraham, or even more than Abraham, she was tested and found worthy of the trust God placed in her.

Mary’s faith was nurtured and brought to maturity through suffering. The inner struggle of Joseph at the news of his bride’s pregnancy, reported by the evangelist Matthew, gives us a glimpse of the tension and mental agony Mary might have gone through during the days preceding her marriage. She never appeared in public to participate in the honour and glory of her son as a miracle worker and great teacher. But she was there when the hour struck, at the foot of the cross. She, who had remained hidden all through the public ministry of Jesus, suffering the loss

and bearing the pain in her heart, came out boldly and stood courageously beside her son, now nailed to the cross between two criminals. One can only imagine the agony she went through seeing her only son hated, despised, ridiculed, blasphemed and put to death before her very eyes; but she did not flinch. She stood firm beside her son and suffered with him, loving, caring and believing. It was her sacrifice for the sin of the world.

In that supreme moment of pain the most sublime word came to her: "Woman, behold you son". Suddenly she was mother - mother of the new humanity, the redeemed mankind. Mary became the mother of the believers in a sense much more profound than in the case of Abraham the father of faith. Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, but was spared at the last moment. Mary on the contrary, was not spared the bitter stroke. She watched her son breath his last among a jeering crowd of enemies. She had to believe that her son, who was tried and condemned by the religious and political courts, and executed as a criminal was the Son of God and Redeemer of the world.

Mary believed, and her faith helped the scattered disciples to come together and wait for the descent of the Holy Spirit. She accepted them, cowards and traitors as they were, as her children and formed them into the family of Jesus. Mary is the woman of unending hope and undying fidelity. She sees with her heart, understands through love, accepts without question and gives without reserve. In her, womanhood finds its fulfillment, motherhood its indomitable tenderness and mankind its model of liberation. In Mary the women, the curse of womanhood is changed into a blessing through her total surrender to the redeeming will of God.

2

ELIZABETH



This is the first woman appearing in the New Testament. When the Hebrew name *Elisheba* was translated into Greek, it became Elizabeth. It means, “God is my fortune” or “The promise of my God”. The person of Elizabeth is portrayed in the Gospel of St. Luke (Lk 1, 5-66).

Elizabeth, born in the priestly order of Aaron was a befitting wife to Zechariah, a priest from the priestly order of Abijah. Their rich heritage and deep faith in God made them an exemplary couple. The Bible says that “Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Lk 1,6). However, they were grieved by the fact that they had no children because Elizabeth was barren and the couple was getting on in years. God heard their prayers and blessed them with a son. Biblical scholars consider barrenness and advanced age that precede the birth of a son indicate the miraculous intervention of God. Thus, Elizabeth was raised to the status of the early matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebecca and Hannah.

St. Luke brings us to the blessed day when Zechariah was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and announced that he was going to have a son: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been

heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John” (Lk 1,13). He was surprised and could hardly believe this good news. So he asked the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years” (Lk 1,18). Zechariah not only expressed his lack of faith but asked for a sign. Thus, the priest, Zechariah became a model for prayer without faith and mindless clinging to empty rituals.

The attitude of Elizabeth was different. She did not receive any vision or hear any message from an angel but believed readily in the intervention of God and considered the son born in their old age as the sheer blessing of God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she also could recognize the mother of God in the simple village girl Mary who visited her.

The Jews believed that life continues through the children and so barrenness was counted a curse. Since the total responsibility for barrenness was on the women, such childless women were insulted and humiliated. Elizabeth suffered all these in her heart and lived in obscurity. Therefore it was an unbounded joy that she experienced when she discovered that she was with the child and the joy came out as praise and thanksgiving to God. “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Lk 1,25). This is the first song of praise in the Gospels.

The abounding joy of Elizabeth became most evident by the way she greeted and received Mary who arrived in Elizabeth’s house, carrying Jesus in her womb. They were related but the Bible does not say exactly what that relation was. It was later church traditions that came to consider Elizabeth as the aunt of Mary. The Greek word “*sungenis*” indicates only that they were related.

It is often explained that Mary went to Elizabeth in order to serve her and to take care of her. However, it is difficult to believe that Mary travelled about 130 Km to Ain-Karim, to render some physical service to her pregnant relative. Besides Elizabeth had enough relatives and servants to take care of her physical needs. The gospel does not specify the purpose of this visit.

The Bible says, “Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home” (Lk 1,56). It is not mentioned specifically whether Mary returned before or after the birth of John. It is possible that Mary stayed there until after the birth of John, though the birth and circumcision of John are presented after saying that Mary returned. This could be attributed to the literary style of St. Luke who reports all that he has to say about one incident or person before presenting another one. For example, St. Luke presents the arrest of John before the baptism of Jesus.

Soon after giving consent to become the mother of the Messiah, Mary travelled a long distance to visit Elizabeth. The angel had brought to her a revelation that was so much beyond her comprehension and which would alter the entire course of her own life. She had read the prophecy of the virgin birth (Is 7,14) but it was really difficult for her to cope with this reality in her life. Mary was well aware of the ramifications of becoming pregnant without the knowledge of the man to whom she was pledged to marry. This should have caused some anxieties and she knew that if anyone would understand her it had to be Elizabeth. So, Mary went to Elizabeth not to confirm the sign the angel announced but to share her experience and to receive understanding and to enjoy the fellowship of faith with another person who also was experiencing the special intervention of God. However, what really followed far exceeded all expectations.

Two important things happened as Mary walked into the presence of Elizabeth. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’ And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (Lk 1, 41-43). Not only Elizabeth but also the child in her womb was filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus, the angel’s word to Zachariah, “even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1, 15) was fulfilled.

Elizabeth was a person who remained open to the Spirit. In the simple village girl from Nazareth, she was able to recognize the mother of God. With a humble heart, she confessed that she was not worthy of this visit. Zachariah had difficulty to believe the words of the angel but Elizabeth had no difficulty to recognize the Messiah in Mary's womb and also knew that something great would happen to the child in her own womb. This child, John, later proclaimed, "One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3,16). This prophecy had already been fulfilled as a first instalment with Elizabeth and John.

Many people might have seen Mary on the way but no one recognized her as the mother of the Messiah or proclaimed the greatness of the one in her womb. Elizabeth was so filled with the Spirit and open to His revelation that she could declare, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1, 42). These words are repeated everyday by millions in every generation as they pray the "Hail Mary" in praise of the Blessed Mother. The first part of this prayer is formulated by using the words of the angel and of Elizabeth greeting Mary. Elizabeth acclaimed that Mary is more blessed than all other women in the world.

The use, "the mother of my Lord" has a profound meaning. It was during the early days of her pregnancy that Mary visited Elizabeth. Still she recognised that Mary was with child and knew who the child was. She recognized in that child the Son of God, the Messiah awaited by the people of God for centuries. The Council of Ephesus, 431 years later, only confirmed the proclamation of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth revealed two important truths about Mary. 1. As the mother of the Son of God incarnate, she is the mother of God. 2. She is the model of faith by daring to believe the impossible. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk 1,45). This was in fact the summary of Mary's response to God. Becoming the mother

of God is the greatest blessing Mary received and the response Mary gave is the kind of response all the faithful should make. Later, Jesus revealed who his mother was and what made her so great (Lk 8,21; 11,28) and it was similar to the words pronounced by Elizabeth.

The song of Mary known as “*Magnificat*” has been presented in some manuscripts as the song of Elizabeth. Under the circumstances there are many possibilities for it. Without any other explanation, St. Luke presents this song with the introduction, Mary said (Lk 1,46). If it was Mary’s song, it is hard to explain why some manuscripts said it was Elizabeth’s. As a barren, elderly woman, when Elizabeth was blessed with a son, she might have composed a song similar to that of Hanna (1 Sam 2, 1-10). There is another tradition that states that this was a song of praise, composed by the early Christians, using many songs and ideas of the Old Testament. Whatever be the origin or conclusion, this song (Lk 1, 45-55) rightfully expresses the faith and attitude of Elizabeth.

For the last time Elizabeth appears in the Bible in connection with the naming of her son (Lk 1, 57). The relatives wanted to give the father’s name to the child received as a special blessing from God. But, Elizabeth said it should be “John”. Usually it is the father who gives the name but Zachariah was stuck mute by his lack of faith and so God chose Elizabeth to name the child. The Gospel does not say why Elizabeth said the name “John”. Anyway, Zachariah confirmed that the name should be John.

All the way through, Elizabeth seems to express more faith and humility than her husband. She was a good wife who supported her husband in his weakness and doubts but prepared her heart as well as the child in her womb, to accept the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The way she accepted the unexpected guest with love and warmth demonstrates that she was a model of hospitality. Because of the manner of reception, the relative who came from a long distance felt welcome and at home. Much more than Mary could have served Elizabeth, she was served by Elizabeth who

provided Mary a safe and secure place to spend the early days of her pregnancy.

The forerunner of the Messiah, John grew up with Elizabeth and was filled with the Spirit even before he was born. John learned from her deep faith, endless hope and trust in the providence of God. “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (Lk 1,80). Jesus asserted about John: “A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet ... I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Lk 7,26-,28). After fulfilling her mission with the naming of John, Elizabeth disappears from the public eye, just as John would later disappear when Jesus appeared on the scene.

3

ANNA THE PROPHETESS



Anna is a character in the Gospel who appears and disappears like a shooting star. St. Luke presents her in just three verses, almost like an appendix to the prophesying of Simeon (Lk 2, 36-38). While the Gospel reports that she spoke about the child it does not record what she said. However, St. Luke portrays her as a powerful personality.

Anna is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Hanna” which means kindness, mercy. Her life itself was a sign of God’s mercy. She was the daughter of Phanuel. The name means Face of God. It is equivalent to the name Peniel that Jacob gave to the place where he wrestled with God a whole night and finally received God’s blessing and a new name Israel, in remembrance of him seeing God face to face (Gen 32, 22-32). The memory of this event is awakened through the name Phanuel. Anna belonged to the tribe of Asher. Jacob’s wife, Lea named her eighth son, Asher because she believed that the women would call her blessed (Gen 30,13). This idea is incorporated in the song of praise uttered by Mary and Elizabeth.

Luke tells us that Anna was a prophetess. A prophet is one who proclaims the Word of God faithfully. Though the Bible abounds with many men who were prophets, only a few women are given the title “prophet.” So, Anna is counted among some of the most important women in the salvation history such as Miriam,

Deborah and Huldah (2 Kings 22, 14). Prophets recognize God's actions in history that escapes the notice of the ordinary people. Anna was such a prophetess that she recognized the Messiah in the child who was brought to the temple by a poor, ordinary couple.

There is dispute about her age because some editions seem to say that she was a widow for 84 years. Some other editions say that she was married for seven years and then lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. The question is: was she a widow of 84 years old or was a widow for 84 years? In those days girls usually got married around the age of fourteen. Now if we add to this the seven years of married life and the widowhood of 84 years we arrive at the age of Judith, namely 105 (Jdt 16,23). The period of widowhood comes to 12 times more than her married life ($7 \times 12 = 84$). Hence this could be a symbolic presentation. The one thing we are sure of was that Anna had lived long many years.

Anna lived an exemplary life. The evangelist has underlined four different characteristics of her life: 1. She never left the temple but worshipped all the time. It does not mean she was living day and night in the temple, but that she remained in the presence of God at all times and took part in all the official prayers. 2. She spent her time in fasting and prayer. Fasting refers not only to abstaining from food but also being close to the Lord. It is a means to receive God's mercy and to do reparation for sins. 3. She added merit to her fasting by praying day and night. That means she prayed all the time. 4. She praised God. Her life was set aside to praise God not only through words but also with her life and deeds. In short, she spent her life in a way pleasing to the Lord, in His presence.

The fact that Anna came right behind Simeon and proclaimed the child as the awaited Messiah, adds credibility to the words spoken by Simeon. For the authenticity of a matter, at least two witnesses are needed (Deut 19,15; Mt 18, 16; 1 Tim 5,19). At the same time we can see Luke's interest in presenting women in an equal footing with men. Though the evangelist does not tell what

she said, it was indeed a prophetic proclamation about the child.

There is some confusion regarding whom she spoke to. Some think that she spoke to all those in Jerusalem who had been awaiting salvation. That would mean the message was only for those who were in Jerusalem. But the opinion of the majority opinion is that she spoke to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Isa 40,2. 50,9. 52.12; Zech 8,1-8. 9,9). This indicates a wider meaning because Jerusalem is a symbolic name for Israel. Israel was chosen to proclaim the message of salvation to the whole world. Hence, in a wider sense, Anna spoke to all those who had been awaiting the arrival of a Saviour. That means the entire world because all the major religions speak of a Divine Saviour who would bring about the fullness of salvation.

Anna was able to recognize the Messiah who manifested himself in a totally unexpected mode and she became a witness to His presence. She was a woman who lost her husband at a very young age. However, rather than cry over her misfortune, she awaited in fasting and prayer for the coming of the Messiah. Like Judith, she offered her life for the service of God. Anna's life proves that those who wait in prayer would see salvation. Through her personal experience, Anna learned and continues to teach that all that God sends, if taken well, would prepare us for eternal life. She is a model and inspiration for all those who proclaim the Word of God.

4

PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW



The mother-in-law of Peter is one of the first persons Jesus touched and healed. This particular incident is reported by all three synoptic Gospels (Mt 8, 14-15; Mk 1,29-31; Lk 4, 38-39), but, neither her name nor her age is mentioned; not a single word form her is recorded either. However, what is said about her reveals something precious about her personality.

After calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus went into the synagogue in Capernaum with his disciples. All the people were amazed at his teaching. There was a man possessed by an unclean spirit who recognized Jesus as the Holy one of God but Jesus rebuked it and cast out that spirit from him. Then, Jesus went into the house of Peter with John and Jacob. Apparently Jesus had made this house the head quarters of his activities in Galilee after leaving Nazareth.

Mark the evangelist introduces the person with this statement, "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever" (Mk 1,30). There are various opinions about her fever. Since there were mosquitoes in the low lands of Galilee, it is possible that she was affected by Malaria, a mortal illness at the time. Apparently the centurion's servant whom Jesus healed by a word also was affected by the same kind of fever (Jn 4,47-53; Lk 7, 1-10). That also happened in Capernaum.

The family and friends told Jesus about the illness of this woman and Jesus healed her. This shows the importance of intercessory prayer. Though God loves and cares for everyone, it is good to pray and intercede for others. Jesus who taught us to love one another encouraged such mediation as it demonstrated the care and affection for the other person. Those who pray must profess their faith and trust in God.

There are slight differences in the way the three Gospels presented the healing. According to Mark Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up; according to Matthew Jesus touched her hand, and the fever left her; whereas according to Luke he rebuked the fever and it left her. All the three agree that she was healed instantly and it was made possible by the Divine presence of Jesus. Power went out of him to perform the healing.

There was a common belief that all the diseases were caused by evil spirits. That might be the reason why Luke presents this healing in the same way as that of casting out an evil spirit. For Jesus who came to provide total freedom to humanity, the healing of the sick was one of the most important acts of liberation.

As soon as the fever left, she got up to serve them. This shows that the healing had the purpose of enabling the person to render service. While Mark and Luke said, “she served them,” Matthew says “she served him.” Serving the Lord includes service to others. One cannot love God without loving the fellow human beings and those who serve the people of God are serving God.

The description of this healing episode, presented just in two verses, clearly depicts the kind of relationship that is expected in families and between families. On that Sabbath day by noon, Peter’s house and vicinity were filled with people who came seeking healing. The healing of one person and the service she rendered helped many to come to Jesus. Thus, Peter’s mother-in-law became a powerful witness. Those who told Jesus about her shows the kind of care and concern family members and friends must have toward the sick. Finally, the mother-in-law demonstrates that the purpose of healing is to serve.

5

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL



The fourth chapter of the Gospel of John presents a woman whom Jesus met at Jacob's well at Shechem, in Samaria. The evangelist does not give her a name, but presents her race, by saying that she was a Samaritan. Though she had not led a commendable life, a significant amount of space, 42 verses of the Gospel is set apart to portray her. John is an evangelist who takes special care in choosing words and events; he gives great importance to the structure of the gospel as well as the position of the events being presented in the gospel. He uses words with a deeper meaning that may not be apparent in the first reading. Hence we have to analyze the episode and the conversation in detail in order to understand what John is trying to communicate.

No miracle takes place here. No sign is given. The entire passage is a rather detailed record of a conversation that throws much light on the two personalities involved, namely, Jesus and a Samaritan woman. On a sunny day, at noon, Jesus is sitting by the well, tired, thirsty and hungry. Though there was plenty of water in the deep well, this traveler did not have a rope and a bucket to draw the water and quench his thirst. Around this time a woman came with the purpose of drawing the water and had the necessary equipments for the same. Jesus started a conversation with her by asking her for some water to drink. Gradually the conversation turned out into a spiritual dialogue and a teaching

of profound truths, leading to the self revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. At this the woman left the water jar there and ran to the city to proclaim her discovery and bear witness to her newly gained convictions. She who was avoiding the public gaze went right into their midst with renewed strength and convinced them to come and see the awaited Messiah. They came, saw, heard and believed in Jesus.

John introduces the episode stating that Jesus “had to go through Samaria” (Jn 4, 4). To go from Judah to Galilee, there were two ways, one through Samaria and the other through the bank of river Jordan. Though the passage through Samaria was shorter, because of the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, most of the Jews used the other path.

When John says that Jesus had to go through Samaria, it has a deeper inner meaning. It points to a Divine imperative because he does not say that Jesus needed to reach Galilee sooner and so took the shorter way. The evangelist want to emphasize the fact that this journey of Jesus to Galilee from Judea through Samaria was God’s will with a specific purpose. It was similar to the words Jesus used with Zacchaeus “I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19, 5).

Judea, Samaria and Galilee were the three important provinces of Palestine. Judea and Samaria were under the Roman rule while Galilee was ruled by Herod Antipas. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided and two new kingdoms were formed. Judea, the southern kingdom had Jerusalem as its capital and Israel, the northern kingdom had Samaria as its capital. Assyria captured Israel in 721 B.C. and most of the Jews were exiled. A Gentile population settled in Samaria. From the inter-marriage of Jews and gentiles, a new mixed population was formed and they were called the Samaritans.

The Jews who claimed that they were the pure descendants of Abraham looked down upon the Samaritans and expressed their superiority in many ways. When the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile and tried to rebuild the Jerusalem temple,

destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C., the Samaritans wanted to participate in the temple building but the Jews did not permit them. Later the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim but it was destroyed by John Hyrcanaus, during the time of the Hasmonean dynasty, in 129 B.C. Thus, the hostility between these two groups continued to increase. The Samaritans, who were small in population and weak as far as military power was concerned, reacted in their own way. Once, during the great feast of Passover, they desecrated the temple ground by throwing dry human bones. This action aggravated the already tense relation between the Jews and Samaritans. It was during such hostile circumstances that Jesus was inspired and decided to go through Samaria.

The city of Sychar is supposed to be the Shechem of the Old Testament (Gn 34). This reminds us of Jacob's well and the field, the rape of Jacob's only daughter Dinah and the mass murder committed by the sons of Jacob. At the very spot where Dinah was raped, now a descendant of Jacob meets a daughter of Shechem! It marked a rewriting of the history and healing of old wounds. Jacob's well was outside the city, at a cross road where the roads going from Jerusalem to the north and from Jordan valley to the west met. Today this place is called Nablus and the well is about 2 KM south-east of the city. At that time the well was only about 800 meter away from the city of Shechem. The well is about 25 meter deep and is about two meters in diameter Even today there is plenty of fresh, cool water in this well; pilgrims make it a pint to draw and drink water from it.

Jesus "came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, ... Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired by his journey, was sitting by the well" (Jn 4, 5-6). After presenting Jesus, St. John turned his attention to the woman. He emphasized the significance of the time by saying that it was the "sixth hour" which is understood as the time of revelation. At that hour the Sun reaches the middle of the sky and then starts the descent. It was at the sixth hour that Pilot presented Jesus as the king of Jews and the public rejected him

(Jn 19, 14). At least for the Samaritan woman, it was an hour of revelation and change.

During those hot hours, practically no one would go out to fetch water from the well that was about kilometer away. Some even think that she was not allowed to draw water from the common well and so she came at that hour to avoid being seen by anyone. She was an outcast from the society because of her ill reputed life. This woman had much to hide. Jesus walked into her isolated, lonely life.

In the conversation Jesus speaks seven times and the woman responded six times. Jesus ended the conversation revealing that he was the Messiah, "I am he". The seventh and last response of the woman was not to Jesus but about Jesus to the people of Shechem. Thus, she became the first apostle of Jesus. The people heard her testimony and recognized the positive change in her. They rushed to see Jesus who caused such a transformation in this woman whom they had long given up on. With that, her mission was over. This woman who was afraid to go out and meet people, voluntarily walked into their midst and told them about Jesus. The evangelist presents a carefully formed dialogue which traces the change that took place in her.

In the beginning Jesus put forward a totally natural question. It was a request, "Give me a drink". At noon tired of traveling and thirsty as well, Jesus sat near the well. He had no way of getting the water from the deep well but this woman came to draw water from the well and could have given him a drink. But she was not going to do it that easily. It was after announcing the 6th hour that the evangelist presented the request for a drink. In the Gospels, only one another time, Jesus asked for anything for himself. From the Cross, to fulfill the prophecy, Jesus said, "I am thirsty" (Jn 19, 28). In the light of this sentence it could be deduced that, the thirst of Jesus while sitting at the well of Jacob was not a thirst for a drink of water.

The woman took the request for a drink in the literal sense and responded in that understanding. She moreover reflected

the hostility that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans for centuries. She did not see a man tired and thirsty; but what she saw was a representative of a racial and national enemy. Her response was not just to Jesus sitting at the well, but a reaction to all the pain and humiliation the Samaritans suffered at the hands of Jews for centuries. Besides, she had a lot of personal wounds from others, especially men. She was tangled in her pains like a lamb tangled in a thorn bush.

Jesus wanted to liberate her from her painful past. In the place of natural water that quenches the thirst only for a limited time, and has to be drunk again and again, Jesus offered her the living water that would quench her thirst forever. However, she still remains on the natural level and misunderstands Jesus' offer of living water as water from a spring, Since it is flowing, spring water might seem to be living. Hence she asked if he was greater than Jacob who gave them that well. This question had many edges to it.

Jacob is the forefather of the Jews as well as of the Samaritans. There is a common element and at the same time a claim that the well belongs to her forefathers, the Samaritans. Can you give anything better than this well that gives fresh water all the time? Who do you think you are? Who are you? She began to wonder about him.

Jesus always took the lead. Rather than get caught up in earthly matters, he lifted her from the physical level to the spiritual level. He slowly guided her from the meaningless debate to a level of hope. She did not understand the source of living water. She thought if she would get that spring, she would never have to come to draw water from this well. She welcomed the idea of having her own spring and never having to come out in public to fetch water. So she said, "Give me that water".

Her request would remind one of the words of Isaiah, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isa 55, 1). More than that she seems to be responding in anticipation to the words of Jesus: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one

who believes in me drink... 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (Jn 37-38). He was referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. So she was asking for the Holy Spirit without knowing it and that marked a turning point in her life.

The conversation took a turn from the general to the specific, from the people to herself. Jesus invited her to take a look into her painful past. He asked her, "Go, call your husband, and come back". It was a prophetic voice that opened her eyes to the painful realities of her past life. It cut right into her heart and she confessed that she has no husband.

Jesus did not blame or condemn her for her sinful past, but invited her to see herself totally in the presence of God and see her life through God's eye. "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband" (Jn 4, 17-18). What happened to her husbands? Was she leading a loose life or had the men taken advantage of her? Did she leave the husbands or had they left her? While agreeing that she said the truth, he invited her to examine, repent and renew her life.

As if to mark a change in her attitude and life, the woman took the initiative in directing the conversation. She realized that she was standing before a prophet. Even the Samaritans were waiting for a true prophet who would teach with authority regarding the place and mode of worship. King David captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of the Kingdom and Solomon built the temple there. But there were other places where the Israelite people worshipped. It was King Josiah who enforced the law of worshipping only in Jerusalem. Moses had said nothing about Jerusalem but did say about Mount Gerizim. She fell back again into a debate between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus directed the conversation again to the need of change in persons and society. She was chosen to hear the revelation of Jesus regarding the true worship. God manifested Himself in Jesus and so He is the Truth. It is the Holy Spirit that transforms

people into the children of God. Filled with the Spirit, they offer themselves through Christ to the Father. Those who worship must do so in Spirit and Truth. She did not understand all that he revealed to her but she confessed her hope and helplessness. "I know that the Messiah is coming ...When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us" (Jn 4, 25). She overcame her hostility, inferiority complex and disappointment, and opened her heart to God. Now, the living water could flow into her and become an everlasting spring in her.

The moment had come for Jesus to reveal himself. This woman became the first person to whom Jesus revealed his true identity by saying "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (Jn 4,26). Here the conversation ended and she got into action. Her heart was filled with grace. As she found what her soul had sought all the time; she left her water jar, the symbol of her past, empty life, and ran to the city to share the great truth she had discovered. No more was she worried about or haunted by the past. Her deep wounds were healed. Hostility in her heart gave way to love and missionary zeal. No more was she preoccupied with herself and so now she was free to witness to the love of God she experienced.

Now, there was only one thing she wanted: everyone must come to know Jesus. She proclaimed this message in a very powerful way that it produced immediate and positive result. No more she felt the need to hide her painful past. Being convinced that the truth was the most powerful witnessing, she revealed her personal experience by her last and seventh response, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (Jn 4 29). People ran to him. After hearing him they said to her, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (Jn 4, 42). She became the first apostle who attracted all her people to Jesus.

She was changed before her situation changed: and the change in her caused change in the society. What happened at Jacob's well is an example of total liberation. The woman at the well was

an example of total change in a person. Jesus sought her amiably and led her tenderly, but powerfully. She followed him like a sheep following the shepherd and has become a beacon for all who nurture the tendency to get lost in the wounds of the past.

6

HERODIAS



The name Herodias immediately invokes the horrible picture of the bleeding head of John the Baptist on a platter. All the three synoptic Gospels present this incident (Mt 14,1-12; Mk 6, 14-20; Lk 3, 19-20). The

most graphic and horrifying one is the description of Mark (Mk 6, 24).

When we examine her historical background we can see that it is not surprising that Herodias could commit such a heinous crime as asking for John's head. She was the grand-daughter of Herod the Great who had killed all the infants in and around Bethlehem just to make sure that Jesus who was born in Bethlehem will be eliminated. Herod married Mariamne, to establish a connection with the Hasmonean royal family and Herodias was the fourth daughter of their son Aristobulus. Her brothers were Herod of Calcis, Herod Agrippa who became the king of Israel and Aristobulus.

Herod the great had another wife with the same name, Mariamne (Mariamne II) and Herod Philip was the son born in this marriage. Herodias was married to this Herod Philip and they were living in Rome with their daughter, Salome. Archelaus and Antipas were the sons born to Herod the great in another wife,

Malthace. After the death of his father, Antipas became the ruler of Galilee and he was married to the daughter of Aretas, King of Nabatheans. In the year 28 A.D. Herod Antipas went to Rome and while staying in the house of his half brother Philip, he fell in love with his wife Herodias. Consequently Herodias divorced her husband Philip and married Antipas. Hearing this, the daughter of Aretas, the first wife of Antipas, fled from Galilee and went to her father.

Thus, Herod Antipas married Herodias, daughter of one brother and wife of another one. Seeing them together, the people of Israel became furious because in their view this marriage was a blatant violation of the Law of Moses. John the Baptist publicly denounced them and demanded to end this unholy union. The prophetic voice resonated on the banks of the Dead Sea, in the wilderness of Judea and on the banks of river Jordan. According to the Law of Moses, one was permitted to marry a brother's wife only after his death without children (Dt. 25, 5). But Herod marrying Philip's wife while he was still alive was considered a breach of divine law.

Antipas was in a dilemma. Aretas became furious at Herod who humiliated his daughter by marrying another woman and prepared for war. Antipas was not strong enough to withstand all these oppositions. His own people turned against him for breaking the divine law and king Aretas declared war against him for insulting his daughter. Adding fuel to fire was the repeated public condemnation by John the Baptist. Antipas arrested John and put him in prison but John kept on denouncing them even from the prison. The king knew what he had done was wrong and was living in sin. Though he felt disturbed, he eagerly sought out John and listened to him.

Herodias realized that the situation was not in her favour. John was condemning Herod for breaking the first marriage and demanding the dissolution of the second marriage with Herodias. The people were crying for her blood. The insulted king of the neighbouring country was trying to do away with her to save his

pride. Above all, her husband was wavering, unable to make a decision. She felt like she was standing on quicksand and decided that to save her pride as well as her very life she had to get rid of John.

Herodias waited for an opportunity to execute her plan; it came during the birthday celebration of Herod. To entertain the audience that included all the important people, lords, army officers and local leaders, she arranged a dance by her daughter, Salome. Pleased with the beautiful dance, Herod praised her to the sky and promised to give her anything she desired. This, Herodias saw as an opportunity to achieve her one aim.

Instigated by her mother Salome told the king: “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter” (Mk 6, 25). Herod could never take a firm stand. Fearing that others would think less of him if he refused to comply, he ordered to have John’s head to be given to Salome and she gave it to her mother. After this cruel action, the Gospels say nothing about Herodias.

The Jewish historians have recorded more about the Herodian family and also about Herodias. About ten years later, in 37 A.D. at the death of Herod Philip, the Roman Emperor Caligula appointed Herod Agrippa, Herodia’s brother, as the king of the region ruled by Herod Philip, Ituraea and Trachonitis. Herodias, fired by her ambition to become queen, desired her husband to become a king, like her brother. Compelled by her constant prodding, Herod Antipas went to Rome to request the crown. Since the Roman Senate had received many complaints about his activities in Galilee, they exiled him and put his domain also under Agrippa. As the sister of Agrippa, the Emperor gave Herodias permission to stay in Galilee or Rome. But, she chose to go with her husband into exile in France. Thus she stayed with her husband till the end of her life. They had no children and so no descendants.

In the light of the episodes recorded in the Gospels, Herodias might appear to be a cruel character but, before we judge her it would be well to consider her background. Looking into her past might help us to understand why she behaved as she did. Herod,

the grandfather of Herodias, had killed anyone who posed the slightest threat to his crown including his own wife and sons. He had appointed Aristobulus, Mariamne's brother as High Priest but when Herod saw that the people acclaimed him as the successor of the Hasmonean dynasty, he felt threatened and therefore arranged the murder of the high priest in the swimming pool in Jericho. He had Mariamne killed in 29 B.C. and Herodias' father, Aristobulus and his brother Alexander were killed in 12 A.D. Herodias grew up in this family where her life also was under constant threat. She might have absorbed some of the values of her grand-father.

Like her grandfather, she also wanted power. She was attracted to Herod Antipas only because he was the king of Galilee. Since she grew up in Rome, she had absorbed the Roman values and Roman culture. Marriage, divorce and remarriage or extra-marital relationships were common in that culture. Violence and murder to seize power was not uncommon in Rome. Hence, she did not think twice to leave her first husband and to marry Antipas. Driven by the hunger for power and thirsting for luxury, she manipulated situations to suit her needs. Finally when everything was lost, she did not hesitate to go into exile with her husband. The disparity between the Roman culture and religious traditions of the Jewish people could not be reconciled in her mind. She did not understand why they opposed her marriage with Antipas so violently.

Herodias seems to have many things in common with Jezebel who tried to kill the prophet Elijah, 800 years earlier. People saw John the Baptist as Elijah returned. By this very reason, people would identify Herodias who caused the death of John the Baptist, with Jezebel who tried to kill Elijah. These two women personify the cruel face of womankind. They also demonstrated how the family environment influences people.

7

SALOME THE ROYAL DANCER



In the New Testament we see two women with the name Salome. One is the wife of Zebedee and mother of Apostles John and James. The other one is the princess who requested for the head of John the Baptist. The second one's name is not given in the Gospels. She is identified as the daughter of Herodias. The historical records of the time mention her name as Salome.

Matthew and Mark have written about Salome in connection with the murder of John the Baptist (Mt. 14, 1-2; Mk 6, 14-29). Since there are no other historical records about it, some authors tend to question but do not deny the authenticity of the incident. Herod Antipas was very happy that Salome danced during his birthday celebrations and so promised her anything she desired. Prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of the John the Baptist. To save his face before the audience, Herod ordered for the head of John to be brought and presented on a platter to Salome who then gave the same to her mother. With that incident she disappears from the Gospels.

The Jewish historian, Josephus supplies additional information about Salome when he speaks about the descendants of Herod the Great. Salome seems to have been born in 10 A.D. Her father was Philip, the first husband and uncle of Herodias and they lived in Rome. Herodias left Philip and married Antipas and came to Galilee in 28 A.D. Salome came with them. John was killed shortly

after that. Another son of Herod, Philip who was the ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, married Salome who was his niece and about 30 years younger. When he died without any children, Salome became the wife of her mother's brother, Aristobulus. They had three sons, Herod, Agrippa and Aristobulus. (*Since so many of the members of the family bore the same name it is difficult to keep them straight and to have an accurate record.*)

Her name is connected with the word 'Shalom', which means peace. But she never knew peace. She is often presented as a cruel murderer who cut the head of the prophet John. But on closer observation one could see that she was but an unfortunate character, manipulated by close relatives. Her mother was a power-hungry woman and did not remain faithful to her husband. This led to divorce and re-marriage. Salome was forced to leave her father and to live in the palace of Galilee and Fort Machaerus in Perea. Over the years she became an instrument in her mother's attempt to secure power. The mother's ambition might have poisoned the daughter also.

It is not usual for a princess to dance in front of the royal guests. When she was asked to show off herself before all the important guests, she did not have the gut to follow the example of queen Vashti who denied a similar invitation from the emperor. Another possibility was that her love for her mother made her so hostile to John the Baptist that she supported the conspiracy to kill John.

A confrontation between two cultures, two faiths and two different lifestyles took place at fort Machaerus, the royal residence of Antipas. Herodias and Salome who grew up in Rome, where divorce and polygamy were common, could not understand the Baptist's objection to divorce and insistence on having only one wife. They, who were used to the easy-going attitude of Rome and luxury of the palace, could not understand the asceticism and austerity of John's life and ideals. In John, they saw only an insane fanatic and feared that his wild ideas would spread and endanger their lives. Hence, they saw John's death as an imperative for their safety and peace of mind.

In the midst of two women who played the cards with firm determination and definite purpose, Herod felt helpless and manipulated to do what he did not want to and should not have done. He forgot that he did not have the authority to kill an innocent person. Valuing popular opinion more than truth and justice, the king went beyond the limitation of his power. All the three characters, namely Salome, Herodias and Antipas, might have their own explanations and justification but before the Lord they would have to accept the responsibility for their actions.

Those who refuse to relinquish sinful ways would see the ones who correct them as enemies. Herodias and Salome were ready to go to any extent in order to protect their position and power. Herod found John the Baptist who continued even in prison to speak against him and challenged him to a change of life as a threat. The only way to silence him was to cut off his head. Authorities, who do not want to listen to the truth, would do anything to silence the ones who speak up. Even today this silencing continues in a more subtle ways. Herodias and Salome continue to be symbols of those who silence the opponents, suppress prophetic voices and protect conventional status. However, the bleeding head on the platter speaks volumes and is more powerful than the king who sits on the throne. One can never bury the truth.

8

SALOME — MOTHER OF TWO APOSTLES



The name Salome appears only twice in the Bible and they both are in the Gospel of Mark. Mark presented Salome as one of the women who stood at the foot of the Cross. She was also with the women who went to anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb (Mk 16, 1). Nobody else used this name in the Bible. Who is she? Luke has not included her name in the list of women who followed Jesus (Lk 8, 1-3).

All the four Gospels speak about the women who stood at the foot of the Cross. Luke recorded no name. All the other evangelists recorded certain names and some explanations. A comparative of study of those descriptions would shed some light on the character and identity of Salome. Regarding the women from Galilee, who followed Jesus, Matthew tells:, “Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (Mt 27, 56). Mark writes: “There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Jose, and Salome” (Mk 15, 40). According to John: “Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene (Jn 19,25).

In the list of John there are four people while Matthew and Mark give only three names. Only Mary Magdalene’s name we

see in all the three lists. John talks about the mother of Jesus. All three agree that one of the two remaining women is Mary. But there is a difference in the way this Mary is described. Matthew and Mark recorded that she was the mother of James and Joseph. Evidently James the younger and Jose of Mark are the same as James and Joseph of Matthew. Many conclude that the Mary, the wife of Clopas is the mother of James and Jose(ph). Hence, the one remaining is none other than Salome.

The three Gospels present her in three different ways. Matthew refers to her as the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Mark calls her Salome, while John calls her the sister of Jesus' mother. Do all three actually refer to the same person? All agree that Matthew and Mark are presenting the same person. There is something special about the person John presents. If John also is talking about the same person it leads to a new revelation. The woman who stood at the foot of the Cross was the sister of Jesus' mother. Another point is that James and John were the close relatives of Jesus.

Some Bible scholars consider this as a mere assumption without sufficient proof to support it. They say that the evangelists mention only a few of the women who stood at the foot of the Cross and so they might not be talking about the same persons. All the same we cannot deny the possibility that Salome might have been the sister of Mary, mother of Jesus.

The gospels do not say much about Salome but we do have some significant information. She opened her house to Jesus and his disciples. Important changes took place in the life of Salome as Jesus left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, at the beginning of His public life. Salome did not prevent her sons from following Jesus. Attracted by the Kingdom of God, Jesus preached, they left boats and nets and followed Him. She not only encouraged them but she herself embraced the new way. Leaving her home and family, she joined the young prophet and his disciples and joined the women who served Jesus supporting Him also with their means (Lk 8,3).

The disciples envisioned the Kingdom of God in terms of earthly power and glory. They thought Jesus came to re-establish the kingdom of David. The journey to Jerusalem was seen as a procession to accept the kingship, a long-cherished dream of the Israelites. That might have been the reason why James and John approached Jesus with the special request, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk 10, 37). There should be no surprise that as close relatives of Jesus they considered asking for the most important position in the kingdom as quite reasonable

However, the fact that two of the three important disciples made such a request displeased the other disciples. Maybe that is why Matthew presented it as a request of the mother (Mt. 20,21). It is possible that this mother might have pleaded for the high positions for her sons. However, looking closely at the situation, we can see that, the request came from the sons.

When all the dreams were shattered and the disciples ran away deserting the master, Salome stood firm, with those women who followed Jesus, at the foot of the Cross till the end. She did not regret being known as a follower of a condemned criminal and joined those who participated in the burial. She remained close by and joined those who went to anoint the body after the Sabbath. Thus, she was a disciple in every sense of the word.

The little information we get about Salome sheds some light about the disciples and the beginning of the Church. The first members of the Church were the people who burned with zeal in the presence of Jesus. Many of them were family members such as the mother of Jesus, mother's sister Salome and her two sons, the brothers, James and Jose and their mother. The one John calls Clopas, was Alphaeus the father of Apostle Jacob (Mk 3, 18; Lk 6,15). According to the traditional belief, he was the brother of Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, and so Jacob and Jose would be first cousins of Jesus

Salome did not withdraw from the discipleship even when all

the hope of an earthly kingdom was shattered. Neither did she call her sons back. She offered her time and resources to support the Apostles. Thus, Salome is still a model disciple and demonstrates that blood relationship is not an obstacle for discipleship. By listening to the Word and participating in the suffering of Christ, all can become part of the new family. In every sense of the word, Salome became a member of the new family Jesus formed, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8, 21).

9

WIDOW OF NAIN



This is a character that appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Neither her name nor a word from her is recorded. The episode is presented in seven verses of which three deal with her. But, the picture presented in

these few words speaks volumes. She was the embodiment of sorrow, a woman with no name, no voice and no place in history.

This woman who is presented in a few words has a life history that would melt anyone's heart. She is a widow, on the way to bury her only son. Since the son, who was her sole solace and hope also has died there is nothing for her to look forward to. Overcome with grief, she moved like a dead person perhaps wishing that it was she who was going to be buried. She had lost every meaning in life.

There was a belief that the untimely death of a husband is caused by the sin of the wife. Hence, widows were objects of insult and humiliation in the society. Suffering all the pain in her heart, she lived only for her son. At least she could live under his care. But, now he also died. The past was tragic and now the future looked even more miserable and bleak.

The name of the town is Nain which means pleasant or happy,

like the name Naomi. There is still a small village called Nain near a hill called Nabidahi, on the northern side of the valley of Esdralon, in the south of Galilee. To reach there one has to travel south, 8 Km from Nazareth and 40 Km from Capernaum. Shunem where Prophet Elisha brought back a widow's son to life was close to this place. Endor where Saul met with the "medium" who called up Samuel is only 3 Km away from this place. There are still tombs carved in the rock and they were bringing the young man's body to this cemetery.

Everything seems to be over for this grieving woman. The tearful procession to the cemetery, carrying the body of the young man, met with another group of people with a young man, coming in the opposite direction. Jesus of Nazareth who has said: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11,25) stood in front of the funeral procession. It turned out to be an encounter between life and death. The Lord of Life walked into valley of death. After curing the servant of the Centurion, he had walked 40 KM for this encounter.

Everyone who came to console her must have told the woman the same thing, "Don't cry". She had heard this many times when her husband had died as well. Then she had at least a son who gave her a reason to live. Now, with the death of that only son, she lost everything. What else could she do? If she did not cry her heart would break as her sorrow was greater than she could bear. Tears would lighten the heart and so if we cannot take away the reason for the tears, it is better to allow them to cry. Those who are steeped in sorrow must be allowed to cry. It is difficult to watch some one cry and so all would tell them not to cry.

Now, the woman heard those words again! The one who told her not to cry put out his hand and touched the coffin. Then, He pronounced those life-giving words, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" (Lk 7, 14). Hearing this order the dead man sat up and began to talk. It was not a dream but a reality! To deepen this awareness, Jesus gave him to his mother. Now, the tears of sorrow gave way

to tears of joy. In total surprise, the people cried out; “ A great prophet has risen in our midst; God has looked favorably on his people!”(Lk 7, 16). The Bible does not say what happened to the mother. She experienced the presence of God who came down to the valley of tears. The life that was returned to her son was a symbol and indication of eternal life.

This incident has much in common with two episodes in the Old Testament. The first one is Elijah restoring the life of the son of a widow in Zarephath. The widow had helped Elijah when he came to the town and her son died. She accused him of bringing God’s curse upon her but Elijah prayed for the child and he came back to life. “Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; so the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” (1 Kgs 17, 22-24). The second one is the Shunamite woman’s dead son returning to life by the prayer of Elisha (2 Kgs 4, 32-37).

The episode of the widow of Nain teaches us that there is no problem too difficult for God to solve. Even in the midst of the worst problem, we must not lose hope. Jesus who wiped the tears of the widow would come into our lives also and teach us that death is not the end but the beginning, beginning of the eternal life with the Father. The One who raised the son of the widow would lead us to eternal life.

10

A SINNER - MODEL OF REPENTANCE



Jesus was invited to dine in the house of Simon, a Pharisee. A woman of ill repute walked into the dining hall which led to a heated debate. In that violent storm, the masks of many hypocrites fell to the ground revealing their true face. Sin, repentance and love became key subjects of discussion. Her very presence apparently put the reputation of Jesus in question.

The woman was weighed down by the sense of guilt she carried and her heart was troubled by the awareness that she had been walking through the wrong path. She was also burdened with inferiority complex because the society in which she lived insulted and humiliated her. She knew that she was an unwelcome guest in all public places. In spite of all these factors, filled with a deep desire to be freed of her burden, she sought the One who came in search of the sinners.

With a contrite heart, she fell at His feet. Tears flowed down from her eyes, like a stream. She abandoned herself at those feet and pleaded for mercy with all her heart. She uncovered her head, wiped the feet with her hair and anointed the feet with precious oil she had brought with her. Jesus looked at her with compassion and she experienced His healing touch that made her whole again, and filled her with gratitude. As she walked away with a light heart and a joyful face, the Pharisees who considered themselves as holy and so needed no repentance groped in the

dark, not understanding the attitude of Jesus or the freedom the woman experienced.

Luke has recorded this incident to show that Jesus restores not only physical life but also spiritual life. Through the episodes of healing, he presented Jesus as the Lord of life. One who was near death (the servant of the centurion) was healed and another one who was dead (the young man at Nain) returned to life. In the episode under consideration Jesus is presented as one who has the authority to free the human person from sin, an evil force that could destroy the soul. This woman is presented in 15 verses (Lk 7, 36-50) but nowhere is her name mentioned. No word was uttered by her all through the episode. Practically no other character in the Gospels was subjected to so much of misunderstanding.

All the other evangelists have presented an episode of anointing but with slight differences. Mark reports: "While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head" (Mk 14,3). Matthew has the same report: "Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table" (Mt 26, 6-8). In the episode of anointing presented by John, it was Mary, sister of Lazarus who did the anointing: "There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (Jn 12, 2-3).

Based on the common elements such as the jar of perfume, anointing of the feet and wiping with hair, many authors have concluded that Luke is presenting the same incident. But, the search cannot end there because the woman in the episode recorded by Luke is a public sinner. This has been emphasized by the evangelist and also by the Pharisee. Hence the speculation proceeded in the direction of identifying her as Mary Magdalene, and consequently presenting Mary Magdalene as a public sinner

because in the Gospel of Luke the anointing seems to have taken place in Galilee.

Magdala was an important town about five kilometers north-west of Tiberius. Among the Jewish people this town had a bad reputation as here were many women who had been engaged in prostitution. This fact has contributed to the rise of a tradition that concluded that it was a woman engaged in prostitution in Magdala that came into the dining hall of Simon. Thus, many became convinced that Mary Magdalene was the public sinner who repented and became a follower of Jesus. But there is no sufficient proof in the gospels for such an assumption.

Besides identifying the sinner in Luke's description with Mary Magdalene, some of the ancient traditions have further identified her with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus because of the episode of anointing. However no possible explanation can be given to the question, how did the Mary of Bethany became the prostitute of Magdala? There is about 150 Km distance between the two towns and there is no evidence to the fact that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Neither is there any proof for the assumption that Simon the leper of Mathew and Mark is the same person as the Simon in the account of Luke. In fact just the contrary seems to be the truth because right after the anointing by the sinful woman, Luke introduces Mary Magdalene as a new person: "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out"(Lk 8,2). Nowhere in the New Testament can we see prostitution being presented as "possession by evil spirit". Hence it has to be concluded that the sinful woman in the Gospel of Luke is neither Mary of Magdala nor Mary of Bethany.

The evangelist did not reveal the identity of this woman, may be because he respected her as a human being and wanted to keep her privacy. Since no name or place was recorded, some people went wild with their imagination and forced many identities on her. To satisfy the readers' curiosity, various artists gave her different names but they are not in congruence with the Gospels. The introductory sentence: "And a woman in the city, who was a sinner" (Lk 7,37) gives a hint about her personal

identity and life style. There was apparent contradiction in such a person coming into the dining room of a Pharisee. It was a dramatic entry that reinforced the reputation Jesus had that he was a friend of sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors (Lk 7,34).

The woman came into the dining hall and stood at the feet of Jesus. In today's set up, it is not easy for anyone to come near the feet of a person sitting at the table. But, according to the custom of the day, the rich in Israel used to dine like the Romans, reclining on divans with their legs stretched out. This position made it possible for the woman to access the feet of the Lord. She wiped her tears that had fallen on Jesus' feet, with her hair. It was another daring move because Jewish women were not supposed to show their hair in front of other men. It was a crime serious enough that a man could divorce his wife for showing her hair in public.

The woman did not stop at washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair but continued to kiss them unceasingly and then anointed them with a costly perfume. The sharp critical eyes of the other men pierced her heart, but she did not worry about the way others would see her. She could not even think what would happen to Jesus by her show of repentance and affection. Disregarding all traditions and customs, she placed herself at His feet.

The Pharisee who invited Jesus was shocked and said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of a woman this is who is touching him— that she is a sinner" (Lk 7,39). They all knew who she was and what she did. They publicly despised her and wondered why Jesus who claimed to be a prophet and rabbi, allowed her to touch him. They saw the exterior and judged while the Lord who sees the heart responded differently.

The Pharisee was wrong to think that Jesus did not know who she was. He knew not only the woman's past but also the hypocrisy of the so-called "holy" men. Jesus invited all to open their eyes to the reality at hand by the question he asked at the end of the story he presented. There were two debtors and both were unable to pay. One owed 50 while the other one owed 500.

The master cancelled the debts for both of them. Who would love him most? The Pharisee answered naturally, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt" (Lk 7, 43).

It is interesting to hear stories. When a story is carefully formulated, the listeners will be drawn into it inadvertently and become part of the story. By the time they realize the story is about them, the story will be over. Many of the stories Jesus said had this quality to it. The man who judged the sinful woman was passing judgment not on her but on himself.

Before God, all are sinners. We can never repay our debts to God. Some are aware of their debts and search for God's forgiveness, while some think that they are holy, justified and owe nothing to God. They neither desire nor receive forgiveness. They are the ones who received less forgiveness in the story. The last sentence Jesus pronounced eliminated all the doubts. "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love; but the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Lk 7, 47).

The relationship between love and forgiveness need to be examined. The words of Jesus give the impression that because she loved more her many sins were forgiven. Simon's response eliminates any possible doubts "the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Lk 7,47). God forgives not because man loved but because of His compassion. Love is the response of the sinful person and expression of gratitude. This teaching is evident all through the bible. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5, 8). "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3, 16). "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4, 10). The love the woman expressed was a response to the great love and forgiveness she received.

Here we see the goodness of the sinful woman and the hypocrisy of the Pharisee. Actually it was the woman who was rejected by all, that provided true hospitality to Jesus. When

the host neglected to give a proper welcome to his guest, she performed them when she washed his feet, perfumed them and covered them with loving kisses. She did all these because of the great love she experienced as a result of the forgiveness she received.

Only those who are aware of their sinfulness could receive forgiveness. Those who are not forgiven, love sparingly as they love only themselves and also because of their hypocritical holiness. Such people were not able to believe and understand Jesus. Their question “Who is this that forgives even sins?” shows their blindness and hard-heartedness. But the woman who was well aware of her sinful life received forgiveness and returned with joy. Jesus told her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Lk 7, 50)

Out of curiosity, we might ask when were her sins forgiven? When did she see Jesus and listen to his words? Seeing his deeds and listening to his words, she began to experience repentance and so she came to receive forgiveness? May be she came into the dining hall to express her gratitude. None of these details are given by the evangelist.

The woman was aware of her sinfulness and the need for forgiveness. She knew that Jesus would not reject her and would forgive her sins. Her trust in him was not in vain. When everyone else insulted and humiliated her, Jesus praised her action. She took it as a sign of the forgiveness she received. Love of God and forgiveness of sins are inter-related. This woman without name is a real model of repentance and forgiveness.

11

THE CANAANITE WOMAN



Nothing is accidental with Jesus. Every action, every word was filled with compassion and done with a deliberate plan and intention. But, in this episode Jesus appeared to be different. Never before or after, had the Gospels recorded an unkind word Jesus has spoken to someone who came seeking his help. Here Jesus appears to be rather rude with a mother who came pleading for the healing for her daughter. Jesus who always upheld the dignity of others seems to humiliate this woman, indirectly calling her a dog. Who is this woman who seems to challenge Jesus? What is the meaning of this insult?

Matthew (15,21-28) and Mark (7, 24-30) present the episode with slight differences. Jesus had travelled to the district of Tyre and Sidon. For some reason he did not want anyone to know that he was there but he could not go unnoticed. A woman came begging him to heal her little daughter. Matthew called her a “Canaanite woman”. Mark says she was a Gentile, of Syro-Phoenician origin which indicates her country and religion. There were two kinds of Phoenicians - one group lived in Northern Africa, around Carthage and the other group lived in Syria and they were called Syro-Phoenician. She was a gentile, living outside the Promised Land.

This woman came because she had heard that the prophet from Galilee had reached the area and that there was no illness he could not cure and no demon he could not cast out. He was kind to the sick and to the poor; he was the very incarnation of love and mercy. With all these convictions and great hope she cried out to him “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon”(Mt. 15, 22). That was the cry of a heart-broken mother. Contrary to his usual behavior, Jesus totally ignored her. Neither the disciples nor the woman understood the way he reacted to her. But, she was not ready to give up as she was desperate and firmly believed that only this man could cure her daughter.

It was humiliating for a woman to run after a man who chose to ignore her. But, her love and concern for her daughter was greater than her pride. There was no other place she could go seeking healing for her beloved child. When she thought about the way the devil was hurting her daughter, she could not help but persistently cry for the help of this man. She followed him crying and begging. Finally the disciples asked Jesus to send her away, probably not because they felt any sympathy for her but because they were irritated by this woman coming behind them crying for help. Jesus’ response: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15,24) was difficult even for the disciples to understand

“All my hopes were in vain”, she said to herself. “He would heal only the Jews. As a gentile woman, I am not going to get any help from him”. His strange behavior surprised her, because it contradicted all that she had heard about him. She was confused but did not turn away; her love for her child pushed her forward. In desperation she ran ahead and overtook the crowd. Kneeling before Jesus she cried out again for help. This time Jesus’ response was even more harsh: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mt 15,26). Who are the children? Who are the dogs? Was Jesus also prey to the prejudice that considered Israelites as children and the gentiles as dogs? Though it appeared

to be so, there was a little difference in the word used and so she fastened her hope to that word and it made all the difference for her.

In Greek there are two words for dogs. One refers to any dog “Kuon”. Most of the time, Bible uses this word (Ps 22,21; Prov 26,11; Sir 13, 17-18; Lk 16,21). Matthew used this word in the saying: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you” (Mt 7, 6). Here, Jesus used another word, “Kunaron” which means pet dog or puppy. She saw the positive side of the word and responded with more confidence. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table”(Mt 15,27). She did not make any claim; did not ask to be counted among the children. It is the responsibility of the master to feed the domestic animals. She was satisfied to be counted as a pet dog and so held on to that hope.

Seeing the steadfast faith coupled with the deep humility of this woman, the mask of rejection, indifference and arrogance melted. Jesus could not pretend any more that he did not care about this woman and her child and so responded, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly” (Mt 15,28). So, that was the reason for all the feigned indifference towards this poor woman. He knew her faith is strong and wanted to expose that positive quality in this gentile woman, to the whole world. He also wanted to give her a chance to grow deeper in her faith and so pushed her to her limits. That treasure in her was not to be hidden.

According to the Bible, especially in the gospel of Matthew, the divine plan was to proclaim the Gospel first to the Jews and then through them to the gentiles. The plan that has been revealed starting with the call of Abraham (Gn 12,3; 22,18) was fulfilled in Jesus. It was according to this plan that proclamation of the gospel during Jesus’ earthly life was restricted to the Israelites. However the people of Israel did not cooperate with this plan to accomplish the salvation of the world through them. Hence,

after the Resurrection, Jesus exhorted the Apostles to proclaim the Good News to all the peoples in the world (Mt 28,19) and with this commission the new project was inaugurated. Matthew presents Jesus as the Savior, king of the Jews whom the Israelites rejected and the gentiles accepted.

Jesus tested the faith of the Canaanite woman and she proved to be worthy of the trust he placed in her. She became the shining example of firm faith, far above the Jewish leadership having no faith and the disciples of little faith. She is also an example of unselfish love. For the sake of her little daughter she was ready to forget her dignity, social status and customs. Parents who are worried about their children may follow her model and pray ardently and long that they may be freed of any evil habit or problem they might be having. God would free them from whatever “devil” has possessed them. It might be drug abuse, unhealthy relationships, bad habits etc. Pray that they may be liberated, without being discouraged by the initial silence. We have to keep on asking until we get what we need.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Schools in connection with the Church and faith formation, used to be a place that would help the parents in bringing up the children in good Christian faith. But, today schools have become a nightmare with drugs, immoral lessons, atheism and Satan worship groups. Here also the Canaanite woman is a model. She recognized that her daughter was tormented by a devil and prayed until Jesus cured her. Parents need to do all that they can to make sure that the children get proper education. Praying and pleading might not produce instant result. We have to keep on asking until we receive; keep on knocking until it is open, without worrying what others would think. Recognizing the one who is able to save, pray unceasingly, forcefully and with firm trust and hope. Through the example of her faith, the Canaanite woman teaches us to put our trust in the Lord.

12

THE WOMAN WITH A HEMORRHAGE



Was it such a crime that this woman who suffered for a long time touched the fringe of the cloak of Jesus who was rushing to the house of the synagogue leader, to heal his daughter who was near death? Suddenly Jesus stopped and asked who touched him. No one, including the disciples, understood the meaning of that question because people were pressing against him. But, Jesus knew that power had gone out of him and was keen to expose the one who received it. Why? Who was she?

All three synoptic Gospels have recorded this incident with slight variations. (Mt 9, 18-28; Mk 5, 21-43; Lk 8, 40-56). While Jesus was on the way to the house of Jairus, the synagogue official, a woman touched him and she was healed. This took place in between the request to heal the daughter of Jairus and the restoring of her to life. Jesus had gone into the land of the Gerasenes and cured a man possessed by a legion of evil spirits. The cured man was asked to go home and proclaim the great things God did for him. Jesus was on the way back to Capernaum when a woman touched his cloak and was healed.

This woman had been suffering from hemorrhage for twelve years and had become physically weak and financially drained. Thus, she was suffering in mind and body. She had heard about Jesus and believed that even if she gets a chance to touch the fringe of his cloak, she would get well. She waited and prayed for such an opportunity.

All the same she knew that if people came to know her condition, she would be found guilty of a serious offence of rendering others unclean. There were definite directions about the way a woman was supposed to behave during her menstrual cycle. "When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean" (Lv 15, 19-20). "A woman who gives birth to a boy will be impure for 40 days but if it is a girl she will be impure for 80 days. If a woman have prolonged hemorrhages, she should behave as if during the days of regular menstrual cycle" (Lv 15,25). The place she lives and uses would be impure and so she was not to go outside her room.

Many women used to have this kind of problem and so there were various treatments. Many of them were rooted in superstitions and sounded like magic. To mention some of them as examples: 1. burn an egg shell of the ostrich and carry the ashes around; 2. Carry a grain found in the dung of a white donkey; 3. Dig 7 holes in the ground and burn seven vine branches in the holes. Then make the woman sit in the ashes of one hole, give her a glass of wine and then pull her up saying "be freed of your hemorrhage"; thus, have her sit in all the seven holes and by the end of which she would be healed. No one knew the relationship between these treatments and bleeding. The doctor was not supposed to be questioned but obeyed. May be that is why this woman did not get well after she did all that the doctors had asked her to do. It only helped to empty her purse and to make herself weaker.

This woman who touched Jesus was such an unfortunate character. One can only wonder at how much she must have suffered being shut in for 12 years, going through such ridiculous and difficult treatments, being humiliated and insulted of being impure, and then having no money even for her daily expenses! In her desperate condition, she just longed to be healed. She

knew that only Jesus could cure her and so decided to break all barriers and go to him. She took the risk of going out and causing others to become impure by her proximity.

Four important things were evident from the way she behaved:

1. She was aware that she was sick for the past 12 years.
2. She had a deep desire to get well.
3. Deep faith in Jesus – she knew that she would get well if she could touch even the fringe of his clothes.
4. Readiness to take the risk – going beyond all the limits set by the society and tradition she went out among the crowd and touched the garment of Jesus.

Mark has written that she touched his clothes while according to the report of Matthew she touched the fringe of his cloak.. There is something special about the fringes. , Moses had instructed the Israelites to make fringes to their garments. “Make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner” (Nm 15,38). Hence the pious Israelites used to make fringes for their garments. They were supposed to remind them of the commandments and encourage them to live according to the will of God expressed through the Law. Accordingly these fringes came to be considered a sign of holiness. Jesus criticized them as meaningless practices (Mt 23, 5). Anyway, ordinary people used to believe that these fringes have special power. May be that is why she wanted to touch the fringe of his cloak. Jesus proved that it is not the fringes that give healing, but God’s power and her faith.

Her faith was not in vain. The moment she touched his clothes, she experienced the effect of healing in her body (Mk 5, 29). She had come secretly and she was hoping to withdraw unnoticed, keeping the joy of being healed to herself. For the first time in 12 years she experienced the relief of being free of that illness. But, before she could get away, an unexpected action came from Jesus’ side. He stopped in the middle of the way and turning to the crowd he asked, “Who touched my clothes?” No one except this woman understood the meaning of that question.

Why did Jesus try to expose her? She was afraid that the crowd would be angry with her for being in their midst and making them all impure. She had suffered long and at last for the first time experienced a moment of peace. Now all that consolation was gone. She confessed to herself that she did wrong by coming out of the room, doing what was forbidden to her. Now, she began to wonder if she made the master unclean by touching him. Will he be angry with her? How can she atone for the sin she committed? She decided to confess her crime and accept whatever punishment the Master pronounced. She came forward and presented her story of suffering over the years and finally the healing she received.

Before the crowd could say anything, or react to her, with great compassion and love, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (Mk 5,34). Jesus exposed her to the public to make them aware of the deep faith she had. He did not care about the social taboos that ostracized one who has an illness, declaring the person unclean. Neither did he find any value in the empty rituals and superstitions. Her faith had healed her and Jesus wanted all to know the depth of her faith. The crowd was pressing against him but none of them had the kind of faith that brought healing.

She had expected only a physical healing but the compassion of God poured into her and she was restored physically as well as spiritually. By calling her "daughter" with great tenderness and love, Jesus raised her to the status of "the child of God". It was a public proclamation of her faith

The poor and the sick are not beyond the reach of God's love and mercy. Jesus demonstrated again and again that those who suffer are in the center of God's heart. Illness is not a curse or punishment for any sin. If we approach Jesus with faith, He will restore us. This woman, whose name is not given, had great faith and that faith healed her in mind and body. Jesus presented her as a model of faith and of true liberation.

13

THE BENT WOMAN IN THE SYNAGOGUE



The incident recorded only in Luke (Lk 13, 10-17) is symbolic of the kind of burden that society imposes upon women and forces them to be burdened and bent, impossible to rise and stand up straight for what they were meant to be. Like many other women in the Bible, this woman's name is not recorded. The one thing emphasized is that she was not able to stand straight. For 18 years she had been in that condition. The reason for this debility is attributed to her being possessed by an evil spirit. The word used in Greek origin is "*Pnevuma-astheneias*" which means "a spirit of infirmity". The common belief of the time was that all the illnesses were caused by the devil and the symptoms shown in the person would correspond to the nature of the evil spirit that possessed. This woman could not stand up because she was possessed by a devil that makes people weak and bent over. Jesus depicted it as bondage (Lk 13, 16).

The condition of the woman being in bondage could point also to her mental as well as her social situation. It is possible that her physical condition affected her mental state or the stress in her life had pushed her to be bent down. Medical doctors might have their own analysis about her physical and mental status and explain the situation based on their theories. The evangelist presents her as a

symbol and representative of women in general. During the time of Jesus women were oppressed to the point of being bent down. At the same time this woman stands for all who recognized the liberation Jesus provided and stood up to praise God.

During the NT time in Palestine, women were supposed to be subjected to men during all her life— until marriage under the protection of her father; after marriage subjected to her husband, in case the husband dies she would be subjected to her son or the closest male relative. When the daughter reaches the age of marriage, her father decides to whom she is to be given in marriage and accepts the bride's price for bringing her up. A woman is supposed to give birth to sons. The more sons she has the more she is valued. Infertility was attributed only to women and it was considered a curse from God. The untimely death of a husband was considered as the fault of the wife. If the husband dies without children the wife would become the wife of the nearest male relative. Only if all the relatives refuse to marry her will she have the freedom to marry another man.

The man had very little obligation to his wife. He has to give her food, clothing, bury her if she dies, and pay for two mourners. If the husband becomes displeased with the wife even for some minute reason, he could divorce her. Diminishing beauty, inability in pleasing the husband with tasty food etc. were sufficient reasons to divorce a woman. Under no circumstances women were allowed to ask for a divorce.

There were grave discriminations in the area of religion also. In the temple and synagogues special areas were fenced out for women. Going beyond that limit was considered a crime deserving severe punishment. She must obey all the prohibitions prescribed in the law. She can pray but never aloud, not even at home. No Rabbi would accept a woman as a student of the law. Women were not allowed to study them but had to obey all the prohibitions. Men considered it below their dignity to speak to a woman in public. Women were not allowed to be witnesses in the courts. Basing on the example of Sarah who said she did not laugh after laughing (Gn 18,15), women in general were considered as liars,

and so not trustworthy in courts. These are only a few examples of the discriminations against women.

The bent woman in the synagogue was a symbol of all the women who were under discrimination and oppression. It is surprising that she even came to the synagogue. Apparently she came as she did every Sabbath and stood in the area designated to women, bent and unable to lift her eyes to God

Suddenly everything changed. Jesus spotted her and called her forward. Hearing Jesus' calling, she forgot all the boundaries and laws that restricted her, and rushed forward. Jesus touched and healed her in body and soul. Immediately she stood straight, raised her hands, lifted her eyes to the Lord and the joy that filled her soul came out as praise and thanksgiving to God. She forgot the law that she was not supposed to go beyond the area designated for women; she forgot or did not consider any more valid the law that forbade a woman to speak in public. For the first time in 18 years, she was delivered from the burden she was carrying and stood up. She felt an urge to praise the Lord for the great gift of healing she received. She shouted aloud, and all in the synagogue heard the good news. The story could have ended with this. But, the Evangelist presents the second part, even more dramatically.

The President of the Synagogue became angry that Jesus broke the law by performing a healing on Sabbath. But reluctant to confront Jesus in public he rebuked the woman and made the general statement about the law concerning the Sabbath observance.. There were 39 activities the Jews were forbidden to perform on the Sabbath. The law permitted them to do only what was essential to sustain life on a Sabbath day. Everything else was forbidden. So, the leader of the Synagogue said:, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day" (Lk 13,14).

This was a distorted view of the Sabbath law which was originally instituted to ensure rest to all those who work hard. This should be observed in memory of the liberation the Lord

had given them from the slavery in Egypt (Dt 5, 13-15) Instead of ensuring rest and liberation, the law had become a heavy burden when interpreted by the experts. Jesus strongly reacted against such interpretations: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day” (Lk 13, 15-16). This gives a new explanation for the state of infirmity of the woman. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the lawyers who did not give the human beings the consideration they gave to the animals.

The woman’s state of being bent was a manifestation of her being the victim of unjust laws and practices. More than the devil, it was the evil forces in the society that had kept her under bondage. Though she was not valued by many in the society, Jesus saw her as a valuable person, a daughter of Abraham and so an heir of the promises given to the patriarchs. Through his words and deeds, Jesus asserted that she also deserved freedom and respect that every man received. The people were happy to listen to this message of liberation from Jesus. “All his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing” (Lk 13, 17).

Jesus freed a woman who was bent; she stood up straight and praised God. This shows that true worship would and should, lead to freedom. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26, 13). The people gathered at the Synagogue rejoiced and joined the woman to praise God. The words Jesus used were very significant. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (Lk 13, 12). Jesus wanted her, as well as all the human beings, to be free and experience the dignity they have as children of God. Those who are convinced to be the children of God will not bend their knees before any one, but God.

14

WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY



She was an unfortunate woman who became prey to the cruelty and crookedness of some men who wanted to trap Jesus. This is an episode that appears only in the Gospel of St. John. Her name is not given but some information about her life style is revealed. The Pharisees who were vowed

to obey the Law of Moses in all its details and the Scribes who analyze and explain them even to the minute details of the law, brought her before Jesus.

It happened in the morning after the feast of the tabernacle, a function that lasts all night. Jesus sat in the area set apart for the Gentiles in the Jerusalem temple. A large crowd came to him and he began to teach them. The Pharisees and Scribes staged a drama by dragging a woman caught in adultery, in front of Jesus. Apparently she was a married woman and they seem to have found her engaged in sexual relationship with another man. They caught her and brought her before Jesus and asked him to decide what to do with her. The law is very clear regarding the punishment meted out to such people. "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death" (Lev 20,10); If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel" (Dt 22,22).

There is no doubt in the matter of the law and they had caught her in action. Then, why did they approach Jesus? They must have had a hidden agenda. Jesus was known as a kind and merciful prophet but communicated the will of God powerfully. The Jews were disturbed by his fame and popularity. Once they sent the soldiers to arrest him but they returned impressed by the way he taught (Jn 7, 32-45) and then there was a dispute even among the authorities (Jn7, 50-53). This time they thought they would be able to trap him. "They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground" (Jn 8, 6).

Whatever decision Jesus made, they could use it against him. If he condemns the woman according to the law, they could catch him on two accounts. 1. That would be renouncing the good news of God's mercy, he preached all the time. 2. The Jews did not have permission for executing any one. Hence, he would be going against the Roman law and he could be accused of breaking the law (Jn 18,31). If Jesus showed mercy to the woman and refused to condemn her then he could be accused of going against the Law of Moses and encouraging people to break the law of God. Thus, the stones they picked up to throw at the woman, could be direct at Jesus. Either way they would succeed in proving Jesus as a false prophet and turn the people against him.

The woman was only a bait they used to trap Jesus. She has neither name, nor personality nor voice. She had no right to defend herself either. The leaders who caught her did not ask some of the fundamental questions they should have asked. If caught in adultery, both parties should be punished. In this case, where was the man? Why only the woman was brought there? Or was it a plot like the leaders created as in the case of Susanna? Some explain that this was a drama staged by her husband to make it convenient for him to divorce her. Some others say that it was planned only to trap Jesus. Anyway, this woman was a scapegoat and an instrument in the hands of those cruel leaders.

Humiliated and insulted, she stood there like a frightened

lamb in the midst of wolves. People were standing around with stones in their hands to throw at her. She felt rejected by all and even God seems to have forsaken her. With a broken heart and depressed mind, she stood there expecting the stone to fall upon her at any moment. She stood there with head down like a dead person.

Jesus did not say a word. All he did was bent down and write with his finger on the ground”(Jn 8,6). No one knows what he wrote. Different people have given different explanations. Some says that Jesus wrote the sins of the people who stood there. Some says he was writing the sentence to be read in public. Some others say that it was like the writing on the wall of Balthazar (Dan 5,5). There is no possibility of knowing exactly what he wrote there.

Anyway, Jesus bent down to write. Why Jesus who wished all to stand up, bend down. Even at the risk of creating strong controversy, he made people to stand up as in the case of the blind woman who, upon receiving healing, stood up in the Synagogue and praised God (Lk 13, 10-17). It is possible that he was fed up with the wickedness and cruelty of the people who came with the intention of killing a human being for their selfish reasons. Or was it a physical expression of the Lamb of God who came to take upon himself the sins of the world. Anyway, here we see the horrible face of evil wearing the divine mask of religious laws.

The leaders began to be impatient with the silence of Jesus and compelled him to pronounce the sentence. So, finally he spoke. He told them to stone her in accordance with the law of Moses. But, the judgment did not finish there. He added, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8, 7). According to the law, it is the witness who cast the first stone. But, hearing the condition Jesus set for throwing the first stone, the leaders became puzzled, they looked at each other, no one could claim the innocence Jesus demanded and so one by one, they put down the stones and left the scene. The leaders themselves fell into the trap they set up for Jesus! who continued

to bend down and write on the ground.

The woman who was expecting a stone to fall on her body heard some thing different happening. She felt the crowd withdrawing silently. Now she waited to hear the final decision of this young prophet. She heard that gentle but firm voice. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, ‘No one, sir’. And Jesus said: Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (Jn 8, 10 -11).

Jesus restored her dignity by calling her “woman”. Though he knew who she was and what she did, he did not condemn her. With love, understanding and care he spoke to her and sent her away with a firm warning not to sin again. He was not concerned about her past but the future. He did not say anything to humiliate her or hurt her. The one who sees the heart, saw her heart and spoke to her tenderly. She thought her life had ended but now she got a second chance. All he asked her was to make good use of that life. With a grateful heart, experiencing the forgiving love and unending mercy of God, the woman went away from the place.

15

MARTHA



Martha is the feminine form of the Aramaic word ‘mara’ which means owner, lord etc. Her life is depicted in Luke 10, 38-42 and John 11,1 - 12,8. She is presented as a model for providing excellent hospitality and service, in both Gospels.

Most of the time St. Luke expressed a favorable attitude towards women but in this case, he had a critical approach to Martha. This has created a negative impression of her over the years and she is often viewed as a person not so praiseworthy.

There is a tendency to compare the two sisters and present Mary as better than Martha. Going one step beyond, some present Martha as the model of lay people while Mary is presented as the model of religious life. In a further comparison Martha stands for active ministry while Mary is the model of contemplative prayer life. In this situation, it is essential that we examine closely what the Bible and the Church tradition say about her. There are great differences, in the way Luke and John present Martha. Luke concentrates on a single theme, “service”. John presents a comprehensive picture in which she is presented as a model of discipleship, in many aspects.

St. Luke presented Martha in the middle of teaching about the different phases of discipleship. The good Samaritan was

presented as a model of helping a person in need and stated that this kind of love and care for others are essential prerequisite to attain eternal life (Lk 10, 25-37). The episode of Martha and Mary was presented to show another side of discipleship which involves not only actively serving but also sitting at the foot of the Lord and listening i.e. prayer. Both, service and prayer have equal importance. Hence the evangelist exhorts that one should not be neglected for the sake of the other.

The statement that “Martha welcomed Jesus at home” gives the impression that the house belonged to her and she opened it to Jesus and his friends. Bible does not say anything about her marriage or family other than her brother Lazarus and sister Mary. Her sister Mary sat at the foot of Jesus, listening to him while Martha was distracted by her many household tasks (Lk 10, 40). The original word used in Greek was “*Perispavo*” which indicates a situation in which a person is pulled in many directions and not able to concentrate on any one thing. Martha was caught in this kind of a situation and felt neglected by her sister who should have and could have helped her. Mary, unaware of all that needed to be done in the house, sat near Jesus, listening to him.

Martha could not understand why Jesus did not ask Mary to help her. She began to think that neither Jesus nor Mary was being fair to her and so she decided to voice her protest. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (Lk 10,40). Jesus understood that Martha was hurt and addressed her feelings by saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her (Lk 10, 41-42). By calling her twice, Jesus was expressing his love and affection and at the same time reminding her that Mary also was doing something very important.

Any one could see the importance of the things Martha did such as receiving persons at home, preparing meals and taking care of them. It is more difficult to see the importance of keeping company for the guests and so, Jesus was trying to make her

aware of it. She must know that what her sister did was equally important and so must not expect Mary to join Martha. In a way Jesus was more concerned about Martha's attitude as she was worried and distracted. It is a condition of mind that emerges when one fails to trust in God.

Jesus has taught about the futility of worry many times. "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk 12, 11-12). "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Lk 12, 22-23). We can accomplish nothing by worry, not add even a moment to our life span (Lk 12,25) and so we must abandon ourselves into the hands of God.

The second point was that Martha was distracted. She thought there were more things to do than she could possibly manage. When she was doing one thing, she would be worrying about another thing that needed to be done, at the same time or before. When preoccupied with too many things, we will not be able to do anything right. That would make the person hate everything and everybody. This in turn could lead to self pity, thinking no one understands and helps. If one continues in this state of mind for a long time, he/she would become bitter, not a befitting attitude for a disciple of Jesus.

Martha's complain about Mary was an expression of her negative attitude. She thought Mary was simply wasting time, sitting there doing nothing, while she was engaged in doing so many important things. Hence, Jesus was inviting Martha to go into the depth of discipleship. Calm her mind and know that sitting at his feet and listening was just as important as what Martha was doing. In other words, she must learn to appreciate what Mary was doing.

There was one more point he wanted Martha to know. She was not satisfied with what she was doing. It is possible that she

thought that her sister had chosen the easier job of entertaining the guest while she ran around doing everything. She complained that she was left to do all that by herself. Did she take it up herself or someone asked her to do it? If she was aware of the value of preparing delicious food for her guests and family, she could have enjoyed what she was doing and be happy about it. When people are dissatisfied with what they are doing, they would complain about their own work as well as the work of the other people. This disposition is not suitable for the disciples of Jesus. Jesus said: “only one thing was needed and Mary had chosen it and it will not be taken away from her”. What about Martha? What is this one thing?

All through the Gospels, Jesus teaches about this one thing – the Kingdom of God. Seek the will of God and live according to it. “For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well (Lk 12, 30-31). Again he said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8, 21). Hence, Jesus praised Mary who was sitting and listening to the word of the Lord and presented her as a model of discipleship.

Jesus did not utter those words to take side with Mary against Martha. Both were disciples and they depicted two different sides of the discipleship. It was for this purpose that the evangelist made this symbolic representation. Martha received Jesus in her house but in her anxiety of providing hospitality, she seems to have forgotten whom she was receiving and so failed to find time to listen to him. Service without seeking his presence and listening to his words would not produce the desired outcome.

The character of Martha depicted in the Gospel of Luke is very relevant today. People who are consecrated to proclaim the Kingdom of God often forget their true mission in the midst of busy activities. This trend is evident not only in people who are engaged in the area of education and healing ministry but also in preaching ministry. While involved in active ministry, one must

find time to pray, to make it a divine mission, a Christian service. Prayer enriches the activities and the activities enrich the prayer life.

We see another side of Martha in the Gospel of John as well as in the tradition of the Church. "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him" (Jn 12, 1-12). During this meal, Martha's sister Mary poured costly perfume made of pure nard on Jesus' feet. Both of them served Jesus in the best way possible for them and expressed their love and respect to him. There is no complain, correction or advice as seen in the Gospel of Luke. Rather than presenting just one side of the character of Martha, John concentrated on presenting various sides of the discipleship evidenced in her.

Martha's nature was depicted by saying "Martha Served". The Greek word "*Diaconein*" is translated as serving. This was a very meaningful word during the time of the early Christians. The word "deacon" came from this and is a position set up by the Apostles to designate the persons who managed the temporal needs of the community (Acts 6, 1-7). Later they took up the leadership in the Church together with the bishops and sub deacons.

By the time St. John was writing the Gospel, all these three positions were actively in practice. Though the word "deacon" was not used, John depicted Martha's service in that line. Initially deacons were elected to serve at the table but later it included all the temporal services in the Church as they were responsible for managing the wealth of the community, the Church, in the proper manner.

John presents Martha in connection with the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Martha is presented as a powerful personality and also one who had a house in Bethany, about three Kilometers east of Jerusalem. She was the sister of Lazarus and Mary and Jesus loved all three of them (Jn 11, 5). John has not made such a statement about anybody else. This shows that Martha had great importance among the disciples and in the

early Christian community.

When Lazarus was mortally ill, Mary and Martha send a message, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (Jn 11, 3). When the Master came, it was Martha who ran to receive him while Mary sat at home. In all the activities Martha took the leadership. Even after they informed about the illness of Lazarus, Jesus delayed coming to them and she expressed her regret. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11, 21). In these words Martha expressed her closeness and at the same time, her disappointment that he did not come sooner. Addressing Jesus Lord, She expressed faith and trust in him. She could not understand why Jesus delayed coming to the one he loved. He had been going around and healing people but he did not bother to come and heal his friend, their brother.

Martha did not stop there. She moved to express her hope by saying, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (Jn 11, 22). She was saddened by the untimely death of her brother. Jesus could have prevented that death but he did not do it. Now, she professed her hope that Jesus could still help them because he has that kind of power before God, a hope that goes beyond death. However, she was not sure what she could hope for. When Jesus said that her brother would rise again, she thought he was talking about the resurrection on the last day. Though she has faith in Jesus and in resurrection, there were still areas that were unknown to her.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn 11, 25-26). Even though Martha was heartbroken, she had the capacity and wisdom to understand the mystery of faith. Jesus knew her capacity to comprehend and so after making some deep theological discourses about death and resurrection, Jesus invited her to profess her faith by asking her if she believed what he said. Without any hesitation she responded, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the

world” (Jn 11, 27). This profession of faith conveys that Martha was a well taught disciple of Jesus.

Nowhere else in the Gospels we see such a strong and comprehensive profession of faith. Martha, not only believed what Jesus said about death and resurrection but clearly knew he was the Messiah, the Son of God for whom the whole world had been waiting for. Not even the Apostles were able to make such a clear statement before the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was similar or even deeper than the profession of faith Peter made (Mt. 16, 16). Somehow Martha had a deep comprehension about the teachings of Jesus. After proclaiming her faith in Jesus, she called her sister to come to him. She was being a witness to the good news and proclaimed it saying “The Teacher is here and is calling for you” (Jn 11, 28). Forgetting about herself, she called her sister to the Master. She is a model of a good missionary who brings others to Jesus.

When Jesus asked them to remove the stone from the face of the tomb, Martha again put forward her practical knowledge. “Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (Jn 11, 39). She might have thought that Jesus just wanted to see his friend again but she felt it was too late. But, Jesus led her beyond the logical level and she saw the glory of God in a way she never expected (Jn 11, 40). With this last statement, Martha disappeared from the Bible.

Though we see nothing more about Martha in the Bible, in the tradition of the Church, she has an important place. After the stoning of Stephen, many Christians were killed during the severe religious persecution in Jerusalem. Many were exiled. A group that included Lazarus, his sisters and many other disciples of Jesus were boarded in a boat and sent to the deep sea without any navigation equipments. God led them to the southern part of France and they proclaimed the Good News in that area. Lazarus became a bishop and Martha was a zealous missionary. They started many Christian communities there. God performed

many miracles through Martha and a large number of people believed in Christ.

There are many popular stories about Martha. One of them deals with the killing of a giant snake. In a village in Southern France, there was a huge dragon which used to eat people and animals. No one could subdue this animal that spit fire. Martha who reached there with the Good News, sprinkled holy water on this animal and it became powerless. She tied it with her belt and the villagers killed it. This killing of the terrible dragon was a symbol of fight against evil. It could be against any evil power such as destroying life, terrorism, sexual abuse or any such social evil. It is also a symbol of women power. Martha tied the dragon with her belt, an action that signified overcoming evil by the sanctity of her life. Martha is a model of energy that comes from faith and service with love.

16

MARY OF BETHANY



Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha was an important disciple of Jesus as she excelled in her devotion to the Master. With a prophetic vision, she anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial. Evangelists John and Luke praise her attitude and actions. Without mentioning her name, Matthew

and Mark have depicted her anointing. In the Church tradition, she has been subjected to many erroneous criticisms.

Luke has presented her as a model disciple with her single minded devotion to the Master (Lk 10, 38-42). While Martha was busy with many house hold duties, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him. Jesus supported and confirmed her devotion by saying that she had chosen the better part and it would not be taken away from her. Martha and Mary present two different aspects of discipleship. However, Luke gives greater importance to listening to Jesus rather than serving.

Praising one side does not necessarily devalue the other side. The parable of the Good Samaritan was told to teach that we have to love and care for those who are in need if we are to attain eternal life (Lk 10, 25-37). After showing the importance of service, active ministry, Luke presents Mary in order to highlight another aspect of discipleship, namely, listening and praying. She was like the Blessed Mother who remained in constant meditation of the Word of God (Lk 8, 21. 11, 28).

Through many examples, Luke has shown that sitting at Jesus'

feet and listening to him is only the beginning of discipleship. When we look at the teaching of the Bible as a whole and in particular the teaching of Jesus, we can see that we must not neglect the importance of the Kingdom of God in the midst of busy activities. The ideal would be engaging in the active service of those in need, drawing energy from Jesus through listening to the Word of God and praying. Our faith and love must be manifested through action (Mk 3, 14-15; Mt 25, 31-45; Jas 2, 14-26). St. Teresa of Avila articulated this fact when she said that Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him was only the beginning of discipleship. True discipleship of Jesus requires integration of prayer, devotion and action. John the evangelist emphasizes the need of faith in action.

In the Gospel of John, Mary appears twice and both times, she is with Martha (Jn 11,1–12,8) but demonstrated definitely a different personality. She was crushed by the death of her brother. But, before depicting its impact, John reminded the readers a very important thing she did. “Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill” (Jn 11, 2).

Both sisters joined in sending a messenger to Jesus to inform him about the illness of their brother, Lazarus. But, when Jesus came near the village, only Martha went to receive him while Mary, sat at home, until Martha came and told her that the Master was calling her. When she came to him, she was so grief stricken that all she could do was repeat her sister’s words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11, 32). But she did two things her sister did not do. She knelt at his feet and wept, sign of deep pain and helplessness.

Though Martha also was deeply saddened at the death of her brother, she was able to engage in a conversation with Jesus. She could listen to the theological discourse about the death and resurrection and articulate her faith. But, Mary did not have the disposition to engage in a conversation. All she could do was place everything at the feet of Jesus. She was heartbroken and

her sorrow touched Jesus, filled with compassion he began to weep. “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her...he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved... Jesus began to weep” (Jn 11, 33-35).

When Martha’s response led to the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, Mary’s tears revealed his compassionate heart. This is the only place in the Gospels we see that Jesus wept. Mary’s devotion had the capacity to touch the heart of the Lord.

The fourth evangelist gives great importance to Mary’s anointing of Jesus at Bethany. Mark (14, 3-9) and Matthew (26, 6-13) also have presented an anointing but with certain differences. In all three Gospels we can see that Jesus was anointed while sitting at table in Bethany. Some of those present protested against wasting such a costly perfume but Jesus justified the action saying it was done in preparation for his burial. But, there are some differences in the presentation in all three Gospels. Though John does not say in whose house it was, the descriptions points to the fact that it was the house of Lazarus and his sisters. Mark and Matthew say that it was in the house of Simon the leper and the perfume was poured on Jesus’ head while in the Gospel of John, Mary anointed his feet and she wiped it with her hair. John must have made these differences with a particular intention and deliberation. Bible scholars agree that all the three evangelists are speaking about the same incident.

An anointing is recorded also in Luke (7, 36-50). While Jesus was sitting at table, a woman anointed his feet with costly perfume and wiped with her hair. This action has some similarity with the picture presented by John namely anointing the feet and wiping with hair. The one who invited Jesus for dinner is identified as Simon in Luke while Mark and Matthew identified him as Simon the leper. Because of the similarities, some have concluded that all the four evangelists are writing about the same episode. This identification gave rise to the opinion that Mary of Magdala is the same person as the Mary of Bethany. It was further argued that this Mary is the same person who appears as a public sinner in

the gospel of Luke. Tertullian, the second century apologist (160 – 220) held such an opinion, whereas his contemporary, the great bible scholar Origen rejected this view and categorically asserted that they are different persons.

Pope Gregory I, in a public speech on 21 September 591, presented these three women as one and the same person. The pope's teaching marked the official beginning of the tradition. Accordingly, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha became Mary Magdalene and also the public sinner. This assumption continued until 1969. Before that, the Gospel reading for the feast of St. Mary Magdalene on July 22 was Luke 7, 36-50, presenting her as a model of repentance. After 1969, the suggested reading is John 20, 1-18, that describes her heroic search for Jesus and the first appearance of the Resurrected Lord to her. In the Oriental Churches all three women were considered as separate persons and the universal Church has approved of this view. So, Mary of Bethany is neither a sinner nor Mary Magdalene.

There are so many differences between the account of Luke and the other accounts of the anointing that make such identification impossible. In the Gospel of Luke the incident took place in Galilee, in the middle of the public ministry of Jesus, whereas in the other accounts it takes place in Bethany, near Jerusalem, at the end of Jesus' public life. In Luke the anointing is done by a public sinner as an act of penitence, whereas in the other accounts it is done by a disciple of Jesus as an act of Love and devotion. In Luke Jesus defends the person as model of repentance and gratitude, whereas in the other accounts Jesus interprets the act as a preparation for his burial

The main subject is anointing. What is this anointing? There is no doubt that it was a historical event. But, there is a difference in the manner, day, and interpretation. In Mark and Matthew, the anointing took place in Bethany, two days before the Passover. Soon after the anointing come the Last Supper and Passion. This presentation seems to be historically more authentic.

The disciples were not able to prepare the body of Jesus properly because of Sabbath. Jesus explained the anointing as a preparation for his burial, “By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial” (Mt 26, 12). Inspired by some intuition, Mary performed this anointing and Jesus knew its significance. Mary was a devotee who responded to the promptings of the Spirit deep in her heart.

In the Gospel of St. John, the anointing took place six days before Passover and it was followed by the royal entry into Jerusalem. Hence the question rises if Mary was anointing him as king or preparing Jesus for the kingly function? However, Jesus claimed that the anointing was done in preparation for his burial. Besides, anointing, death and burial were different parts of a single event. While Mark and Matthew state that the woman poured perfume on Jesus’ head, John says that she anointed his feet and wiped it with her hair. Why this difference? Usually, it is slaves who wash and wipe the feet of the guests and the host anoint the head. They do not anoint the feet. Here Mary is not a slave but a family member.

Why did Mary pour the perfume on the feet rather than on the head? Jewish women would show their hair only before their husbands. Exposing hair in public was forbidden. Thus the action of Mary broke all traditional practices. John’s presentation might have been influenced by the incident depicted in Luke. However, John had a different reason to record this anointing the way he did.

John 12, 1 says “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet” while John 11, 2 says “Mary was the one who anointed the Lord”. Here two things deserve special attention. 1. Among the Jews, the head of the guest is anointed as a gesture of welcome. 2. It is for burial that they anoint the feet, symbolizing anointing the whole body. Hence, what Mary did became a prophetic action. All three evangelists agree with this concept. However the anointing had a deeper meaning.

The anointing in Bethany was a preparation for the royal entry of Jesus. Usually the anointing of a king would be done by a priest or prophet but here it was done by Mary of Bethany. Hence, what is her position? She was a devotee who anointed the Anointed One of the Lord. Can we see this as an action that toppled the traditions? There is more possibility of seeing this as a royal anointing because John has reported a solemn anointing of the body of Jesus in preparation for the burial: "Nicodemus... also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews" (Jn 19, 3-40). The royal anointing of Jesus was completed with the death and burial.

Mary did a prophetic action. Jesus assured it to be so and predicted that wherever the Gospel is preached this will be proclaimed (Mk 14, 9). It was a demonstration of total dedication and deep devotion to the Master. She did not worry how others would see it and what would happen to her. With a candid sense of loyalty she did as she felt compelled to do.

Mary of Bethany had a unique personality. She sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him. Seeing her emotion, Jesus was moved to tears. With her love and dedication she reached the zenith of discipleship. She was a devotee who anointed the Anointed One of the Lord and prepared him to enter the Kingship that was going to be fulfilled through death.

Here we can notice a similarity with another Mary who prepared Jesus to enter the way of the Cross by performing the first miracle in Cana. These women were present in all the decisive moments in the life of Jesus. When Mary of Bethany placed all that she had at His feet, some men were calculating the value of the perfume wasted. But, Jesus defended her against their criticism.

17

MARY MAGDALENE



When hearing the name of Mary Magdalene, many think of a repented sinner. Though there is no evidence in the Bible, because of an erroneous tradition in the Church, this concept has become a source of extensive imagination for the artists and poets. Many concluded that this notion is the best way to teach people that Jesus who came in search of sinners would not

reject any sinner. But, this is not the picture of Mary Magdalene we see in the Bible. Hence, we need to examine and study the personality of Mary Magdalene as presented in the Gospels and try to understand the message of salvation without prejudice.

Magdala was an important city on the south western bank of Galilee and it was famous for building ships, shipping industry, export and fishing. Majority of the inhabitants were gentiles. In 20 A.D. Herod built the city of Tiberius, about three Kilometers south of Magdala and made it the capital of Galilee. This caused to diminish the importance of Magdala. However, during the public ministry of Jesus, Magdala was still an important city. It was famous for immorality and the Jews despised the city as well as its inhabitants. The name Magdalene came from this place. Since she was identified with the general traits of the city, she was considered as a prostitute.

The way Luke presented the account in the gospel might have contributed to the above conclusion. While Jesus was sitting at the

table, a woman of bad reputation anointed his feet with perfume and wiped it with her hair (Lk 7, 36-50). Immediately after that, 8, 1-3, depicts the names of the women who followed Jesus. One of the women mentioned here was “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out” (Lk 8, 2). This gave rise to an assumption that the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet was Mary Magdalene.

Those who connected the incident in which Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha, anointed the feet of Jesus with perfumed oil and wiped it with her hair, concluded that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same person. Some went further and identified the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus with the same Mary. Thus three different women presented in the Gospels were assumed as one in the course of time. This concept emerged and developed in the Latin Church, supported by a speech given by Pope Gregory in 591 A.D. The Eastern Church always asserted that these were three different persons and in 1969, the Western Church also accepted it.

Bible does not present prostitution as possession by evil spirit, though they did not often distinguish the sin and possession. Never in the bible do we see exorcism as repentance or liberation from prostitution. Not only that, Luke presented Mary Magdalene as an entirely new person, leaving no possibility to identify her or any of the other women mentioned. It is obvious that the evangelist did not want to reveal the identity of the sinful woman presented in 7, 36-50, may be because of his respect for the individual.

There is more than 150 KM between Magdala and Bethany and so there is no possibility of seeing these two women known in the name of their respective city as one. This might have been one of the reasons for the Church to renounce the tradition of seeing Mary Magdalene as a sinner and changed the Gospel reading for her feast from anointing to the first apparition and commission after the resurrection of Jesus.

When we ponder into the Gospels with an open mind, we

can see that Mary Magdalene possessed a unique, beautiful personality. The evangelists did not explain further the seven evil spirits that possessed her. It might have been a serious illness or possession by evil spirits. Once Jesus cured her, she followed him faithfully, participating in his ministry and used her financial resources to care for the needs of the Master and his disciples (Lk 8, 3).

Mary Magdalene was a faithful follower of Jesus. All that she was and had were set apart for the service of the Master and his mission. She gave without counting the cost and did not withdraw at the face of dangers. Even when all the disciples ran away, she followed the Master as close as possible on the way of the Cross and stood at the foot of the Cross, watching her beloved breathing his last. Her love knew no end or fear and went beyond death. As an approval of her deep love, after resurrection the first appearance of Jesus was to her. It was Mary Magdalene who was entrusted with the great mission of informing the Apostles that Jesus has risen.

The name Mary Magdalene appears in the Gospels twelve times, more than any other women. All four Gospels present her as a witness to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Seven times the Synoptic Gospels list the name of the women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Calvary and in all of them the first name mentioned was Mary Magdalene. John has set aside 18 versus (Jn 20, 2-18) to present her encounter with Jesus. With the mother of Jesus and other women, Mary followed Jesus to the end. With a broken heart they watched Him suffer and die a most painful, humiliating death.

The Roman authorities crucified Jesus, accusing him of being a traitor for claiming to be the King of the Jews. It was dangerous to be known as followers or relatives of the criminal who was crucified as they also could be seen as criminals. There had been incidents of crucifying those who expressed sympathy to the crucified or cried for them. Under these circumstances no one can blame the Apostles for running away and hiding from the

public. This was the reason that Peter denied Jesus when he was questioned.

When all the men ran away in fear the women stood by Jesus. It is mistaken to think that they did not have to fear anything because they were women; The Romans used to crucify women as well as children. The Apostles who had professed to follow Jesus to death ran away, while the women took the risk of remaining close by. In spite of the possible dangers they stood at a distance watching everything and thus became true disciples.

Mary Magdalene was not satisfied watching Jesus from a distance. She went to the foot of the Cross, facing Jesus. It was her faith that made her so courageous and love that compelled her to remain close by. The death of Jesus was unique that "The centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, truly this man was God's Son!"(Mk 15, 39).

After burying Jesus in a hurry, the disciples left but Mary did not go. "So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb "(Mt 27, 59-61). There was no logic in remaining near the tomb as the person was dead and buried. Besides it could have caused suspicion. Love did not know fear and so Mary Magdalene could not leave her Master alone even in the tomb and return to the safety of her house.

After the Sabbath, she was one of the first ones to come to the tomb. She was not afraid of any possible dangers for herself. All she worried was how they would remove the big stone from the face of the tomb. The stone was their obstacle in coming closer to the Lord. Their faith and love was rewarded. To their surprise, the tomb was open and an angel gave them the good news that Jesus had risen. Then, Jesus appeared to Mary and asked her to inform the Apostles that he has risen (Mt 28, 1-10; Mk 16, 1-9).

St. John presented Mary Magdalene with more details as she was with him to witness the death of Jesus and it was she who

informed the Apostles about the empty tomb. She stood at the foot of the Cross with the mother of Jesus, facing him accepting a heroic death on the Cross (Jn 19, 25). After Sabbath, only her name is mentioned as coming to the tomb. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (Jn 20, 1); alone to the tomb where the soldiers stood in guard! Her love did not know fear and her faith in the Master made her an exemplary disciple.

Seeing the open tomb, she ran to the Apostles who were hiding behind closed door, to inform them about the empty tomb. Hearing this Peter and John ran to the tomb and returned to their place after seeing that the tomb was empty. Though all left, Mary could not leave the area. She stood around crying. First the angel and then Jesus asked her why she was crying. “Woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (Jn 20, 13). “They have taken away my Lord” it was a cry from the depth of her heart. No one but the Lord could console her as her sorrow was that deep. First they took and crucified him and now even the body is taken away. Away from the Lord, she cannot find any consolation and that was the cause of her tears and sorrow.

It was this love that went beyond death that prepared for the next scene. She heard the voice of the Lord she thought she had lost. Upon recognizing His presence, her heart was filled with joy and excitement. With this unspeakable joy, she cried out, “Rabbouni!”. Mary who fell at the feet of Jesus, still had a long way to go. Know the Lord and share that knowledge with many. Jesus prepared her for these two missions and taught her that her love and discipleship must go beyond physical presence. The resurrected Lord will no longer remain with her physically, but will continue to be with her in spirit and strengthen her for further mission. The One who entered into the glory of God would remain with us in spirit, invisible to the eye.

After teaching this primary lesson, Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene as his first missionary – to inform the good news

to the Apostles. “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17). The disciples must proclaim what they learned and experienced. By informing the Apostles “I have seen the Lord”, she fulfilled her mission.

Mary Magdalene grew in discipleship, step by step. After being healed she offered all that she was and all that she had to the Lord and followed him faithfully, to his death and beyond death to his tomb. She never doubted or ran away from the Lord but stood at the foot of the cross; sat at the tomb; fell at the foot of the Risen Lord and informed the Apostles, the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. It is this faith, love and fidelity that made her a model of discipleship. It was only just and proper that the Church corrected the erroneous popular tradition that depicted Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner. She challenges us to search for the Truth and then follow it faithfully.

18

JOANNA, WIFE OF HEROD'S STEWARD



Joanna's name appears only twice in the bible and both occurrences are in the Gospel of Luke (8,3. 24,10). Though not many details are given, from the way she is presented, we can draw certain important conclusions. Her name is the feminine form of John which means "kindness" or "the Lord showed mercy". As the name indicates she was filled with mercy.

Joanna's name first appears among the women from Galilee. They followed Jesus and used their resources to care for him and his mission (Lk 8, 1-3). Joanna was the wife of Chuza, steward of King Herod. The Greek origin of the word steward is *Epitropos* which means the one who supervises the property. He might have been the one who was in charge of the royal estates. The word also could mean political manager. Anyway, Chuza was a high ranking officer in the palace of Herod Antipas.

The name Chuza means small pot. It was not a popular name among the Jews but it was so among Nabataeans. The first wife of Herod was the daughter of Aretas, the king of Nabataea. Hence, it is possible that Chuza came from Nabataea. May be it was from this connection that the Evangelists knew about the things that happened in the palace of Herod.

Herod Antipas on a visit to Rome fell in love with Herodias, his half brother Philip's wife and married her. Hearing about this his first wife went back to her father's house. The king of

Nabataea considered Herod's second marriage as a breach of treaty, because marriages were often part of the treaties made between nations and kings, and consequently prepared for war to avenge his daughter. It was in this context that John the Baptist appeared condemning Herod's second marriage and calling for repentance. From this context we can very well see why Herodias demanded John's head. Chuza could have been an eye witness to all these events.

There is another thing the Bible scholars say about Chuza. We see a royal servant approaching Jesus, requesting to heal his servant (Jn 4, 46-53). He came from Capernaum to Cana searching for Jesus. Seeing his faith Jesus healed the servant with a word whereupon the royal servant and his family became disciples of Jesus. Many Bible scholars conclude that this royal servant was Chuza. If this is true, we could gather some important information about Joanna.

During the time of Jesus it was unusual for women, especially married women, to go around with a wandering preacher as it would cause much opposition and scandal among the Jews. But, Joanna was among the women who dared to go beyond the limits set by the Jewish society. Chuza might have allowed his wife to follow Jesus because he believed in this new prophet who healed his servant with a word.

The fact that the wife of a high ranking royal officer became a disciple of Jesus deserves special attention. It would show that not all those who followed Jesus in Galilee were poor people. Some of the disciples had socially and financially high status. In a way this invites us to look more closely into the background of the primitive Christian community.

Jesus proclaimed equal status for men and women in the Kingdom of God. This was a revolutionary concept for the patriarchal society. Joanna was one of the first members of this Kingdom. She did not care for the prohibitions of the society. Neither did she consider going around with a prophet as some thing below her status as the wife of a high ranking royal official.

With a generous heart, she placed her time and resources at the feet of the Lord.

Her discipleship that started in Galilee did not end in Jerusalem. As a faithful disciple, she loved him and was willing to give all that she had for spreading the Kingdom of God. When most of the disciples including the Apostles ran away, she remained with the few women who followed Jesus on the way of the Cross. She witnessed the death and burial of Jesus; she was among those few women who saw the empty tomb and heard the message of the angel that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Joanna is a shining example of the place of women in the primitive Church. She found her value in being a woman and a disciple of Jesus. Stepping down from the royal position, she became the disciple of the one who had no place to lay his head. This woman had the courage to follow Jesus to Jerusalem and to stand at the foot of the Cross. Joanna teaches an important lesson that even people who occupy a high position in the society can and must become faithful disciples of Jesus and proclaim the Good News.

19

THE OTHER MARY



In the Gospel of Matthew this name appears twice. Who is she? In the New Testament there are seven women with the name Mary. 1. Mary, mother of Jesus; 2. Mary Magdalene; 3. Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha; 4. Mary, wife of Clopas; 5. Mary, mother of Joses and Little James; 6. Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12,12); 7. Mary who worked

hard in the Church of Roma (Rm 16,6). Which one of these is called as the “Other Mary”?

Matthew presents the other Mary in connection with the burial of Jesus and then with the visit to the tomb (Mt. 27, 61. 28,1). Comparing this with the Gospel of Mark might help to identify the person. In the Gospel of Mark the person who accompanied Mary Magdalene is presented in one place as Mary, the mother of Joses (15,47) and in another place as Mary, the mother of James (16,1). There are reasons to conclude that the same woman is presented in both verses.

All four Gospels talk about the women who stood at the foot of the Cross. There is much similarity between the presentation of Matthew and Mark. “Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee”(Mt 27:56). “There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome” (Mk

15, 40). The second person mentioned in both Gospels is the same. The ones Matthew calls James and Joseph Mark calls James the younger and Josés. Mark specifies him as “James the younger” in order to distinguish him from James the son of Zebedee. The mother of the sons of Zebedee is Salome. Analyzing the names written by Matthew 27,56. 61; 28, 1 and Mk 15,40.47; 16,1 we can see that the Mary called as the other Mary is the mother of James the younger and of Josés.

While comparing these texts with John, we get some other explanations. There were four women at the foot of the Cross. “Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (Jn 19, 25). Most of the bible scholars agree that “his mother’s sister” is Salome, mother of John and James. The identity of Jesus’ mother and Mary Magdalene are stated clearly. There remains the identity of wife of Clopas. It is quite probable that she is the one Matthew called as “the other Mary”.

Most of the bible scholars agree that this Clopas is not the same person as Cleophas who went to Emmaus (Lk 24, 18). However some important information about Clopas was given by the Church historian, Hegesipus. He has stated that Clopas who was also called Alphaios was the brother of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus and the other Mary was the wife of this Clopas.

All these lead us to the conclusion that many of the close followers such as Mary, mother of Jesus, her sister Salome and her sons James and John; the sister -in-law of Joseph and her son, James the younger, were his close relatives. This shows that of the four women who stood at the foot of the Cross three were his intimate relatives. Secondly the brothers of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6,3 were not the sons of Mary and Joseph but the sons of Joseph’s brother. This provides another evidence for the fact that Mary, mother of Jesus did not have other children.

So the woman, Matthew identified as “the other Mary” was an aunt of Jesus, namely the sister-in-law of his earthly father. She was called the other Mary in order to distinguish to her from Mary

Magdalene and mother of Jesus. The other Mary was one of the few disciples who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, stood at the foot of the Cross, participated in the burial, witnessed the empty tomb and heard the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the angel. She was with Mary Magdalene when Jesus appeared to them and commissioned them to inform the Apostles that He has risen (Mt 28, 1-10). Thus, the other Mary, wife of Clopas and mother of Joses and James the younger, was a model of true discipleship and a woman with the courage to follow the Lord, even risking her own life.



Lydia is an important character for many reasons. She has a name; a job and a high position in the society. Though her name appears only twice in the Bible, the author of Acts of the Apostle, St. Luke, reveals some important things about her character.

Lydia came from the city of Thyatira and was a dealer in purple cloth. During the second missionary trip, the Holy Spirit prohibited St. Paul to proclaim the Gospel in many towns. Finally, while he was in Troas, the Holy Spirit directed him to go to Philippi. This was the first town in Europe where St. Paul preached the Gospel.

Philippi was a Roman colony and a leading city in the district of Macedonia. It was named after King Philip, father of Alexander the Great, who rebuilt it. The historical importance of the city was that in B.C. 42, Mark Anthony established peace in the Roman Empire by defeating the army of Brutus and Cassias who had murdered Julius Caesar. The Holy Spirit directed St. Paul and his companions to this city to proclaim the Good News. Whenever Paul arrived in a place, first he would search out a Jewish Synagogue to preach, but there was no Synagogue in Philippi. The Jews used to assemble on the bank of river Ganga for prayer. Lydia was among the people who came for the prayer. Three things were said about her:

1. She came from Thyatira, an important town of Asia. The

Romans called it Thyatira but today it is known as Asia Minor. It was an industrial city where they dyed costly silk and woolen clothes, in various colors. Luke gives the impression that she was born there but does not say if she was married or not. Since he talked about her family without mentioning her husband's name, it is possible that she was a widow.

2. Dealer of silk – refers to her trade. Lydia who came from Thyatira to Philippi in Macedonia, about 300 Km away, for business purpose was really an important business dealer. She was selling not ordinary clothes but expensive material used by the elite. The original word used was “*Profulopolis*” which meant purple-dye trade. It was a kind of cloth used by the highly rich people. Purple is the royal color. To manage that kind of trade one needed a great capital. In short, Lydia was a rich woman who managed an extensive business.

3. A worshiper of God: This depicts not only her religious outlook but personal attitude. She came to participate in the Jewish prayer meeting but she was not a Jew. However, she might have been in the process of becoming a Jew. She was a gentile woman who had a positive attitude towards Judaism and came with an open mind to learn more about the Jewish religion and their religious practices. She was a devotee who was open to Truth.

The Lord opened Lydia's heart to accept what Paul was saying (Acts 16,14). Paul spoke about Jesus Christ and Lydia was the first European to accept Jesus as her Lord and God. She was a true Christian who opened herself to the inspirations of Christ. Once she came to know the truth, she accepted it and lived according to it.

Bible says “she and her household were baptized” (Act 16,15). The household has extensive meaning as it could include parents, children, servants and associates. Nothing is said about the master of the house. Lydia was the matriarch of a rich family and prepared herself for a decision that would turn her life upside down and guide the entire household to follow Christ. It was the heroic decision of Lydia that inaugurated the Church in Philippi. In fact

that marked the beginning of Christianity in Europe.

Lydia who was baptized and became a Christian invited Paul to her house. “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home” (Acts 16, 15). Paul and his companions accepted her invitation and her house became the meeting place of the local Church. Thus Lydia became leader of the Church in Philippi.

Of all the local Churches Paul founded, he loved the Church of Philippi the most. In all his endeavors, the Church of Philippi supported him with prayers and financial resources. Paul wrote about it very clearly, “You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Phil 15, 20). Lydia was behind all the activities of the Church in Philippi.

Paul and his companions stayed in the house of Lydia as long as they were in Philippi. After Paul was falsely accused, imprisoned and beaten up, he escaped miraculously. “After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed” (Acts 16, 40). Though Lydia was so closely connected with the Church in Philippi, her name is not mentioned in the letter to the Philippians. Some say that she might have moved out of the city or died by the time St. Paul wrote the letters. There is another possible explanation for leaving out Lydia’s name from the letters.

Lydia is a place not a person. It was part of the Roman Province, Asia. That means Lydia must have a different name. In the letter to the Philippians St. Paul talks about two women. “I urge Euodia

and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4, 2-3). Many agree that Euodia is Lydia. There are some people who suspect that there was some serious conflict between these two important women and the Apostle was advising them to be reconciled. It is not clear the cause of the conflict but many think that Syntyche was not ready to accept the leading position of Euodia (Lydia).

Regardless of the value of all these arguments, one thing is sure that Lydia was a very important person in the first Christian community. She is an example of the vital position women had and must have in the Church. Lydia is a shining example of the strength of women and demonstrates what they can do in the world of business as well as religion. She had a very high position and had the capacity to think for herself and make decisions.

Lydia accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior. She and her household believed in Christ and were saved. She turned her house into the head quarters of the Church in Philippi and supported the evangelization process with money and personnel. The people who provided such leadership in the early Church were called Supervisors or Episcopos. Bishop is a translation of this word. There are some who argue that Lydia had the position of a bishop. Though there is no solid proof for this assumption, there is no doubt that she had a very significant place in the early Church.

More than position and power, Lydia was a person adorned with the exemplary qualities of a disciple of Christ, faith, asceticism, service-mindedness, zeal for evangelization, spirit of hospitality and generosity.

21

PRISCILLA

Priscilla was an important missionary who played a decisive role in the early Church. She is named as Prisca in the epistles (Rom 16,3; 1 Cor 16,19; 2 Tim 4, 19) and Priscilla in the Acts 18, 2-26). Prisca is a Latin name and Priscilla is formed adding the adjective little or small. Her name appears with her husband Aquila. The husband and wife joined together in the evangelization ministry and opened their house for the missionary activities.

St. Paul was thrown out of Thessalonica and humiliated in Aerographs in Athens. After these negative experiences, he reached Corinth where Priscilla and Aquila received him at home (Acts 18, 1-2). They came from Pontus, a Roman province south of Black Sea and north of Asia Minor. They were tent makers and Aquila had established a workshop in Corinth. Paul knew this trade and worked there to earn a living while he proclaimed the Good News in that area. They might have been making the curtains that were used for the tents.

Priscilla and Aquila provided hospitality to St. Paul for one and a half years, while he stayed in Corinth and their house became the mission head quarters for the Church in Corinth. Like Lydia, they also had a very high position in the early Christian Church as their lives were set aside for evangelization. When Paul went to Ephesus, capital of Asia Minor, Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him (Acts 18,18) and continued their missionary activities there. "Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures...he knew only the baptism of John... Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately... On his arrival he greatly helped those who

through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus” (Acts 18, 24-28). In Ephesus also they opened their house to the local Church.

Paul wrote about Priscilla and Aquila in his first letter to the Corinthians, “The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord” (1 Cori 16, 19). At the end of the third missionary journey (57/58 A.D.) when St. Paul wrote from Corinth to the Church in Rome, again their names were mentioned “Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ” (Rom 16, 3-5). When Emperor Claudius died, the prohibition against the Christians was removed and so Priscilla and Aquila seem to have returned to Rome. May be they went ahead to prepare for Paul’s visit to Rome.

Priscilla was not discouraged by religious persecution, prohibition or exile. She used them as an opportunity to proclaim the Good News in new places. They worked and earned their living while doing evangelization work. They gave generously to all those who were in need. Like St. Paul, they are a challenge to some preachers who try to become rich through preaching (1 Cor 9,3-18; 4,12). St. Paul calls them, “Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus”. The Greek word “*Sunergos*” was used for coworkers. It is also a technical term for Deacons. This means they had at least the status of a Deacon in the Church.

Priscilla and Aquila offered exemplary service in the Church. They were ready to risk their lives. “Greet Prisca and Aquila... who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom 16, 4-5). The apostle does not say when and where it happened. It might have taken place when there was an attack against Paul in Corinth (Acts 18, 12-17) or in Ephesus (Acts 19, 23-40; 1 Cor 15,32). Priscilla and

Aquila were close associates and supporters of St. Paul in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome, just as Lidia was in Philippi. The couple earned their living by working and also found time for spreading the Good News. Priscilla was a zealous missionary who offered her life for Christ and His Church.

Later Priscilla was given a high position in the Church. A tradition claims that it was Priscilla who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. There is a Church and a catacomb in Rome, in the name of Priscilla. According to the tradition, the Church was built in the place where the house of Priscilla and Aquila existed and their bodies were buried in that catacomb. With generous hearts this model couple offered their lives to the Lord.

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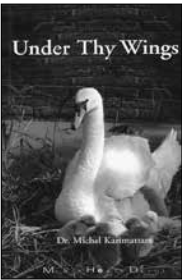


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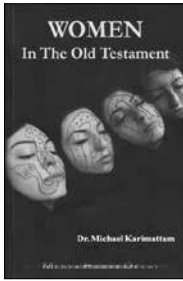
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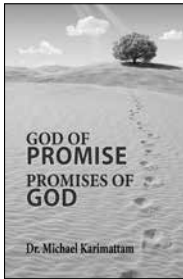
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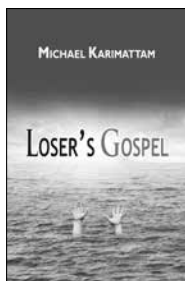
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