

The Great Shake-up!

Passages: 2 Sam 7:1-11, 16
 Luke 1:26-38

The Bible is an amazing book. For thousands of years, men were the principle characters of the Bible:

- The earliest genealogies contained only men;
- the key figures with whom God made covenant were men—Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.
- Israel's 12 tribes were named after men (Benjamin, Judah, Rueben, Manassah, etc...)
- The kings, prophets and priests of Israel were only men.

And yet...(and this is what is so amazing)...occasionally, in the midst of all these men, the Bible suddenly speaks about women; heroic women; brave women; women who made an incredible difference to Israel's history and future. Women like Deborah, or Esther, or Huldah, or Rebekah or Miriam, or Ruth or Hannah or Sarah.

It's almost as if God was deliberately shaking up the status quo by suddenly inserting these women into the story...as if to let men know that, in actual fact, God was not really into patriarchy or dominant men oppressing women and telling them what to do. Every now and then, God simply pushed the men aside and raised up a woman to lead... to rule... to guide... and even save... His people! Some were barren, weak, frail, aged; some were foreigners; some were shy. But remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians? God chooses the weak to shame the strong!

In today's reading from **2 Samuel 7**, there's not a woman in sight. God speaks through the prophet Nathan, promising David that, one day, his house and throne would be so firmly established on this earth that it would last forever. (Verse 10)- ***"Wicked people shall not oppress them anymore. (Verse 11) -"I will give you rest from all you enemies!"*** (Verse 16)—***"Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for***

ever." It sounds like God has a great plan, heh? ...a plan in which God will enlist the mighty men of Israel to fight against her foes, bringing everlasting peace to the nation, right?

Wrong! God doesn't need men for this battle. No, instead God chooses a woman...in fact, she's a single woman, most likely 14 or 15 years old! And although she is betrothed to be married to a man named Joseph, she will not need his help to accomplish the heroic deed that God is calling her to perform.

Luke 1:26-28

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Do you see? This young woman's heroic task...a task that no man could ever perform...was to carry the un-born descendant of King David to full term and give birth to ***"the Son of the Most High God"***!

What you might not realise is that the angel *Gabriel* who delivered this message to Mary had not been seen for almost 500 years! The last time he showed up was to the prophet Daniel while he was in Babylon. Then, suddenly, in quick succession and totally out of the blue, Gabriel shows up to a man named Zechariah. Then, a few months later, he shows up to Mary.

What this means, of course, is that God is not only willing to work with men! He comes to a woman. And why does Gabriel come? Well, it seems that *Gabriel* never spoke to human beings unless it's to do with the arrival of the Messiah. And so, several months earlier, Gabriel had spoken to Zechariah, an old priest in the lineage of Aaron. His wife, Elizabeth, was barren—that is, they weren't able to have children. But, one day, while Zechariah was all alone in the Temple's Holy of Holies, he met the archangel Gabriel face to face! Not

only did Gabriel tell Zechariah that his wife was going to have a baby, but that his son would become the messenger who would announce the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

What was Zechariah's response? What do you think this priest, trained in the service of God and standing in the centre of Israel's temple would say to Gabriel?

Look back at Luke 1:18-- Zachariah says to the angel, ***"How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."***

Zachariah – a man who, for years, has been trained in knowing and serving God in the Temple-- and all he can think of is, *"This cannot physically happen. So, give me more proof!"*

Now, compare Zacharias' response to that of Mary only a few months later. Like we said, Mary is a young woman barely of childbearing age. She's been raised in obscurity. She's probably never been to the Temple let alone stood in the Holy of Holies. When she hears Gabriel speak to her, she's standing in a hovel in the furthest province of Israel.

Shouldn't Mary's heart have been filled with the most doubt? But listen to what she says:

First, in verse 34, she asks, ³⁴ ***"How will this be,...since I am a virgin?"*** Then, after Gabriel tells her that ***"Nothing is impossible with God"***, Mary simply says, ³⁸ ***"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."***

Think again about the two responses to Gabriel's announcements: The NIV translates Zacharias as asking, ***"How can this be done?"*** Zacharias wants proof. He wants evidence. Mary, on the other hand, asks, ***"How will this be done?"*** Mary wants more detail, simply so she can know what to expect.

Perhaps some of the basic differences between men and women are on view here. Men, generally, are more sceptical. They need proof. Women, in general, are more relational. They seem to have a greater capacity to believe and trust.

But whatever is going on, one thing is true—*Luke wants us to know that women are just as important to God as men in God's plans of salvation!*

Indeed, here is one of the interesting facts that sets Luke's Gospel apart from the others. Being neither Middle Eastern or Jewish, Luke doesn't have the same anti-feminine views prevalent in those cultures. For this reason, Luke is free to tell us about all the women that touched the Lord's life. It is only from Luke's pen that we learn about Elizabeth; Anna the prophetess, the raising of the widow's son, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, and the persistent widow who begs the unjust judge to have mercy. Luke also gives us more details than the others about Mary, Martha and Mary Magdalene. Luke tells us more about the women who gathered around the cross and the women who came to the tomb on Easter morning. It is also from Luke's pen that we learn that many of Christ's disciples were indeed women and not just men—women like Joanna and Susanna.

Because of his focus on women, it is Luke who tells us most fully of Mary's predicament. Here she was, a virgin betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal was a legal commitment between Joseph, and Mary's parents -- Mary probably had little say in the arrangement. Once the dowry was paid at the betrothal, there was a legal finality to the commitment. Then, for a year, the betrothed couple lived apart from each other and with their parents. This period insured that the woman was not pregnant at the time of betrothal. Although the two were considered married by all legal parameters, sexual relations were forbidden. If, during that period, it was discovered that either the man or woman had sexual relations with anyone, that party could be stoned as an adulterer.

As you can see, it was a pretty severe system, and, quite frankly, was a system that favoured the men. The women were more likely to be caught than men, given there were no contraceptive devices or birth control pills!

This is what Luke is trying to tell us! He wants to heighten the tension of Mary's predicament. Why? **So we can see what a spectacular woman she really is!** Knowing full well about the consequences of this pregnancy, Mary goes ahead with the plan! ***"May it be to me as you have said!"*** she says.

Quite remarkable, really! Here is a young girl who is, in some ways, even more courageous than Deborah, or Esther, or Huldah, or Rebekah or Miriam, or Ruth or Hannah! Here is a young girl who has more trust in God than Zachariah. And because of Mary's faith, all the prophecies about how a descendant of King David would be born in that "little town of Bethlehem" came true!

Let me finish this sermon with a brief comment about **Romans 16**. You may not know it, but one of the lectionary readings for today (along with 2 Sam 7 and Luke 1) is from Romans 16. To be honest, the reading is really just the last three verses of that chapter...but when I opened it and started to read from the 1st verse, I thought how appropriate the entire chapter of Romans 16 is for us today.

You see, Romans 16 is a list of people in Rome that Paul wants desperately to greet and thank. The surprising thing is that, amongst all those names are the names of 10 women!

Romans 16:1—Phoebe, called “a servant of the church.”

Romans 16:3—Priscilla, referred to by Paul as a ‘fellow-worker’

Romans 16:6—Mary, “a hard worker in the church”

Romans 16:7—Junia, “outstanding among the apostles”

Romans 16:12—Tryphena and Tryphosa, 2 women who “work hard in the Lord.”

Romans 16:12—Persis, “another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.”

Romans 16:13—Rufus’ mother, who acted like a mother to Paul.

Romans 16:15—Julia and Nereus’ sister, who are amongst “all the saints”.

That’s why I say that the Bible is a pretty amazing book. What initially looks like a document that supports and endorses patriarchy and heavy-handed male domination is actually a book about how God has raised women up to a place of equality with men...as co-heirs of His grace and co-labourers in His plan of salvation for the world! Women of God, used by God to change the course of world history through the Saviour they served and loved. Their common refrain was simply; ***“May it be to me as you have said!”***

Now, let me finish by blessing you all, men and women, with the blessing found in the last three verses of Romans 16.

²⁵ Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—²⁷ to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Let’s pray.