

Women of the Bible

Session 1: Introduction

If I were to ask you to name the people in the Bible that you know most about, I suspect that most of them would be men. That's partly because there are more men in the Bible than there are women and partly because we have tended, over the centuries, to focus on the blokes. It's likely that most of the stories you heard in Sunday school (if you went to Sunday school) were about the men and that when you've listened to a sermon based on a character from the Bible, it's usually been about a man. I also suspect that most of the preachers you've listened to have been men and most of the Christian books that you've read have been written by blokes.

Consequently, without us even noticing it, we get into the habit of looking at the Bible from a mainly male perspective.

Discussion:

What are your thoughts about this? Do you agree? Disagree? Do you think it matters? Do you have relevant experiences you would like to share?

You can use some or all of the questions below to prompt your discussion if you want.

- If you look back over your Christian life, how male-focused has your experience been?
- If you're a reader of Christian books, roughly what proportion of the books you've read are by men?
- What proportion of the sermons you've listened to have been by men, do you think?
- Do you think it matters that men have tended to have more influence than women? Does it bother you? Does it ever make you angry?
- Do you get cross with feminists who make an issue of these things?
- Have you experienced sexism in the church? What was that like?

Starting to think about the Bible

When we only look at the Bible through male eyes, there is lots that we miss. Over the next few weeks we are going to look at God and at the Bible through female eyes for a change and see what it might teach us. The Bible is a complex book and it isn't always easy reading. We won't shy away from the difficult issues and the awkward passages and at times you might find

yourself with more questions than answers. But that's good. The Holy Spirit is with us to guide us. And wrestling honestly with the Bible helps us to grow.

One of the things we can find ourselves wrestling with as women, is the fact that the Bible itself is written from a male perspective. It's written by men and there are far more men in it than there are women. Those are just facts. Some of us aren't really bothered by this. Some people are so bothered by it that it stops them and it reading the Bible at all. For others, it's a niggling concern, but to admit out loud, or even to yourself, that you've noticed the Bible feels a bit sexist and that it troubles you, feels dangerous. So we can end up being bothered by the male focus of the Bible, but not feeling safe enough to talk about it. But God is not thrown off balance by our questions and the Bible is robust enough to cope with our honesty.

Discussion:

What are your thoughts about this? Has this been true for you, or other people you've known, or not? How has it impacted you?

It helps to take a moment to think about what the Bible is like.

Read:

Hebrews 4:12, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21

So these two things are true about the Bible:

1. It is inspired by God.
2. It was written by people. More specifically, by men.

Or, as Peter puts it, when he's talking about the prophets, written by *men who were carried along by the Spirit*.

To understand the Bible, we need to hold these two truths at the same time. If you deny either of them, you will run into difficulties.

The Bible is inspired by God. We know that. We know that God speaks to us when we read the Bible, that we learn about God, that it strengthens our faith. We also know that the Bible was written by men. Actual human beings who each lived in a specific time and place and culture.

The biblical authors all lived a very long time ago. The Bible was written between 1200BC and 100AD. This means that most of the Old Testament was written in the iron age. It records stories from oral traditions that are

much older than that. And inevitably it reflects the culture of its original authors and readers. Including the attitudes towards and experiences of women.

How do you think the patriarchal culture of Bible times and Biblical writers influences what we read in the Bible?

What is patriarchy?

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. In patriarchal societies, men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage.

The impact of patriarchy on the Bible

- *Women probably didn't have access to education. Very unlikely to be literate, so not in a position to write the Bible.*
- *The Bible tends to focus on national events centred around monarchs and leaders and wars, where women were less involved.*
- *It was a patriarchal culture where women were just not seen as significant, most of the time.*

We know what this is like, because we are living in a society which is still quite patriarchal, and was very patriarchal not that long ago. So if you think about the people you learnt about in history and science at school, most of them were men. Women tend not to get noticed. Even when they make a significant contribution.

For example, the discovery of the structure of DNA is accredited to Francis Crick and James Watson, even though Rosalind Franklin was equally involved. We view computer programming as a male occupation. But the first pioneer of computer science was the mathematician Ada Lovelace.

Spotting the Women

Because of the patriarchal nature of Biblical culture, the authors usually focus on the experience of the men in the stories and we need to work harder to spot the women. But when we look carefully, we find them. For example:

Were all the disciples men?

We know that Jesus chose a group of 12 male disciples. But we also know that they were not the only disciples that Jesus had. Remember, at one point, he sent out 72 disciples. So what about the women?

Read:

- Luke 8:1-3
- Luke 10:38-42: Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, learning from him, as a disciple. Notice Jesus' response to this.
- John 20:11-16: Notice that Mary Magdalene calls Jesus 'rabboni' which means 'teacher'. That tells us that she was a disciple.
- Matthew 27:55-56 / Mark 15:40-41 / John 19:25-27
- Acts 1:12-14, Acts 2:1, Acts 2:14-18 The women were there at Pentecost! 'They were all together in one place.' And we already know that the 'all' includes the women.

So we know that there were women who were involved enough to be travelling with Jesus and funding his ministry. We know that Jesus defended Martha's sister, Mary, when she was choosing to sit at his feet and learn, as a disciple. His female followers went with him to Jerusalem and were there when he died. They were waiting in the upper room and they were anointed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Just because the male gospel writers don't usually mention female disciples, that doesn't mean they weren't there.

Women in the early church

In the same way, women were far more active in the leadership of the early church than they are often given credit for. But, again, you have to look quite carefully to spot them:

- Romans 16:1: Paul sends his letter to the Romans with Phoebe, who was a deacon in the church in Cenchrea. Phoebe would not simply have been carrying the letter, she would have been there to explain it, to answer questions, and probably to teach from it.
- Romans 16:7: Junia was a female apostle. The story of Junia highlights the ways that translation has sometimes been sexist. First, because Junia is called 'outstanding among the apostles' translators assumed that Junia must be male and renamed her Junias. Which is a male version of her name. When it became clear that she was actually Junia, they then decided that she must be 'esteemed by' the apostles.

- Romans 16:3, Acts 18:24-26: Priscilla and Aquila were a husband and wife who were friends with Paul and ministered together. Interestingly, Priscilla is always mentioned first, which suggests that she was the prominent of the two.
- Acts 16:11-15, 40: Here we meet Lydia. The first Christian convert in Europe. It's in her house, in Philippi, that the church is planted.

Discussion

- What are your thoughts about what we've discussed so far?
- When else, in Jesus' ministry, and in the early church, do you think the women might have been there but not mentioned by the male authors?
- Does this change the way you imagine the events of Jesus' life?
- Have you ever imagined women at the day of Pentecost before?

Final thoughts

- The Bible is both divinely inspired and written by human beings with a particular cultural outlook, that influenced how they wrote.
- If we want to notice the women in the Bible, we often have to look quite hard.
- Although, the Biblical authors often come across as being sexist, we never see God speaking or behaving in sexist ways towards women in the Bible.
- You will find that sometimes the Bible inspires you because it views and portrays women in ways that are revolutionary and ahead of its time. Sometimes you might be angered and disappointed by the patriarchal attitudes of its authors and the way you see women being treated. Talk to God about your thoughts and your feelings.

There are some incredible women in the Bible. The next few sessions we spend together will be an opportunity to spend some time in the company of some of them. And to look at God and the Bible through female eyes for once. You might even find yourself meeting characters you never knew were there.

There is quite a bit of Bible reading in this course. Sometimes, there is a bit of Bible reading to do between sessions.

What will you particularly take with you from today?

Session Two: Is God a bloke?

Read:

Genesis 1:26-28.

Men and women are created in God's image. So men and women equally bear God's image and God is as much feminine as masculine. God is obviously not literally male or female. But we relate to God in personal terms. The imagery we most frequently use for God is male. Shepherd, father, brother, king etc. We often miss the feminine imagery and language for God that the Bible gives us.

Discussion:

- In your prayer life, do you experience God as predominantly male, female or neither?
- Do you ever connect with God as mother as well as father?
- Are there feminine images of God in the Bible that have meaning for you?
- Have there been moments in your life when you have definitely experienced God as feminine rather than masculine?

Share your thoughts and experiences.

El Shaddai

One of the names for God in the Old Testament is 'El Shaddai'. This is often translated as 'God Almighty' but a better translation would be 'the Lord the breasted one'. According to the Bible, this was one of the earliest ways that the Israelites knew God:

Read:

Exodus 6:2-3

David draws on this imagery:

Psalms 131

And it's a name of God connected with wisdom:

Job 32:8

Discussion:

- What might it tell us about God, to see God as El Shaddai?
- What are your experiences of breast feeding and what might they tell you about God?

God as mother

There are many passages in the Bible that give us maternal images of God that are both tender and fierce. Sometimes we get pictures of God as mother and God as Father next to one another.

Read:

- Zephaniah 3:17
- Job 38:28-29
- Deuteronomy 32:18
- Isaiah 42:14-16
- Isaiah 49:14-15
- Isaiah 46: 3-5

God of Compassion

The word for compassion, used in the Bible, comes from the word for womb. This means that whenever God is described as compassionate, God is being described in maternal language.

Read:

- Exodus 34:6
- 2 Kings 13:23
- Nehemiah 9:19
- Isaiah 49:10

God as Midwife

God as midwife is a recurring theme in the Bible:

Discussion:

- What is a good midwife like?

- Have you ever been a birthing companion or midwife? What was that like?
- What is it like to have a good midwife?

Read:

- Isaiah 66:7-13
- Psalm 22:9
- Psalm 71:5-6

Discussion:

- Thinking of the passages we've looked at today, what are your thoughts?
- How does it feel to imagine God in these feminine ways? Easy? Difficult? Reassuring? Unsettling?
- Which of the passages speak to you?
- What do you sense God might be saying to you?

Final Prayer:

Read again Psalm 131 and the prayer below.

Gather your burdens in a basket in your heart. Set them at the feet of the Mother. Say, "Take this, Great Mama, because I cannot carry all this shit for another minute." And then crawl into her broad lap and nestle against her ample bosom and take a nap...

Take some time to be silent together and ponder these words in God's presence

Preparation for next time:

Read the stories of Sarah and Hagar. Try and come at the stories fresh, if they are very familiar to you. You might want to jot down what you notice.

- You can either read the whole story, which will give you some context, and let you see where the women turn up and where they are missed out. To do that, you need to read from Genesis 12 to Genesis 23.
- Or you can just read the passages where Sarah and Hagar turn up. You will need between 10 and 20 minutes to do this, depending how fast you read. The relevant passages are: Genesis 12, 15:1-4, 16, 17:3-6 and 15-22, 18:1-15, 20, 21:1-20, 23

Session 3: Sarah and Hagar

Start by reflecting together on what you all noticed when you read the story and what you thought about it. (If no one got round to reading it before the session, it might be worth doing it together. It won't take that long.)

Just sharing your thoughts and reflections and seeing where that takes you, might be all you need.

Further thoughts, reflections and questions if you need them:

- Did you notice that both women were passed around like pieces of property? What do you notice about God's response to that?
- Both Abraham and Sarah carry the promise. God changes both of their names. They are both chosen.
- See Genesis 21:11-14. A skin of water holds about 4 pints. So Abraham sends Hagar and her teenage son, Ishmael, into the desert, with 4 pints of water and a bit of food. This is a man with immense wealth (see Genesis 13:5-6 and 14:14). He could have sent them with flocks and servants and tents. Everything they need to start a new life. He knows the terrain. This is a deliberate act. He is sending Hagar and Ishmael into the desert to die.

Hagar: a reflection

You will need at least 40 minutes for this.

Entering into a story through your imagination is a great way to pray with the Bible and get a greater insight into the story. We're going to use the passage where Hagar and Ishmael are sent away, which is Genesis 21:14-21.

- Get two people to read the passage aloud, so that you hear it twice.
- On the first reading, just listen to the story.
- On the second reading, begin to picture what would have been happening. Start to imagine the sights and sounds and smells.
- Put down your Bibles and allow around 20 minutes of silence. In that time, imagine yourself in the story. You might be observing, or you might be one of the characters. Run through the story in your imagination. Don't worry if you're not that great at visualising things. Some people have quite vivid imaginations, others might just get vague impressions. Just go with it. Allow God to speak to you as you do and to lead you into prayer.
- Manage your time, so that once you've finished your imagining and praying, you've got a few minutes to make some notes on your experience and to write down anything that God has said to you.
- Take some time to share your experiences with one another.

Prayer

Hagar, in her moment of deepest desperation and weakness, got back on her feet and found the strength to carry on. All it took was a word from God and her eyes opening to see the resources that were already available to her. She needed a word and a well.

Who needs a word and a well today? Take some time to pray for one another.

Session 4: Women of wisdom and courage

Wisdom, in the Bible, is divine and is feminine. The first nine chapters of Proverbs are devoted to describing wisdom (for example, see Proverbs 8:1 - 9:6). Interestingly, Jesus is also described as the 'wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24). Theologians have long connected Jesus with the wisdom character in the Old Testament, who we mainly see in Proverbs.

Scattered through the old testament there are examples of women acting with wisdom, compassion and courage, despite their relative powerlessness. Let's meet a few of them.

Abigail

Read:

1 Samuel 25 and share your thoughts on the story.

Where do you see Abigail's wisdom at play?

Some thoughts in case they help your conversation:

- Sending servants armed with gifts of food ahead of her is a master stroke. David and his men are far more likely to be reasonable after a good meal.
- She is incredibly courageous. She is one woman on a donkey riding out to meet 400 armed men in a culture where rape, particularly of the women of enemies, is seen as normal.
- Her diplomacy is brilliant. Look at her opening line: "since the Lord has kept you from murdering and taking vengeance into your own hands, let all your enemies and those who try to harm you be as cursed as Nabal is..." [1 Samuel 25] Beautifully done. David is still intent on murderous revenge at this point. And she knows it. But in this one line, she not only defuses the situation, she also gives David a way of backing down without losing face.

Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed and Miriam

Read:

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Share your thoughts about the passage. What did you notice?

- Notice that the only Israelites we hear about from this period of slavery are women. It's the courage of the female midwives that rescues many Israelite children. And it Moses' mother and sister who ensure his safety and therefore the eventual rescue of the Israelites.
- We don't actually discover the names of Moses' mother and sister until Exodus 6:20. His mother is Jochebed, his sister is Miriam.
- Did you spot how carefully Jochebed planned? Moses wasn't randomly discovered. She obviously knew pharaoh's daughter bathed in that spot. And she had presumably watched her enough to know that she was likely to be kind.
- Having Miriam there to offer the services of a Hebrew wet nurse is a stroke of genius.
- I am in awe of Jochebed's ability to think and plan so calmly in such a terrifying and heart rending situation.

The wise woman of Abel

Read:

2 Samuel 20:1-2 and 14-22

Share your thoughts about the passage.

Discussion:

- As you think about the women we've met in these passages, are there things these stories have in common?
- What kind of wisdom have we seen in these stories? What were these women wise about?
- How do you think feminine wisdom is distinct from masculine wisdom? If it helps your thinking, it's perhaps worth noticing that the book of Proverbs is quite masculine in the wisdom it offers and the way it presents it, compared to the wisdom we see exercised by women in the Bible.
- Are there wise women who have influenced your life? Who influence your life now?

Prayer:

Take some time to pray for one another. Particularly if there are situations where you could do with exercising some courage and wisdom.

Preparation for next time:

Read the book of Esther before next time. It should take about 30 minutes to read if you do it in one sitting. Make a note of your thoughts and questions.

Session 5: Esther

Start by sharing your thoughts and questions, having read the book of Esther. This might be enough to keep you going for the session. There are some thoughts and questions below, in case they are helpful:

Rags to riches fairy tale, or something more sinister?

In the late 1990's, during the revival in Brownsville USA, Tommy Tenney began to preach some sermons from the book of Esther. You might have heard some of them or read his books. He used the story of Esther as a metaphor to encourage Christians to seek not God's blessings, but God himself. Just as Esther was prepared for her 'one night with the king', so we, Tenney said, should seek to be prepared for our own 'night with the king'. Lots of people found his message really helpful and were encouraged to seek a deeper experience of God. It became a bit of a 'thing', spawning a couple of books, including a novel which was inevitably made into a fairly dreadful movie.

On the one hand, Tommy Tenney is rightly encouraging people to seek a love relationship with God, which is centred on growing intimacy with God and not on asking for and expecting God's material blessings. In the USA where prosperity preaching has such a high profile and influence, this is a particularly important message. And one we all need to hear.

However, using this particular biblical story as the basis for this teaching, has some down sides. Not least of which is that it has encouraged thousands of Christians to see the story of Esther through somewhat rose-tinted spectacles. Tenney says in one of his books that every young woman, deep down, dreams of becoming a princess and that Esther is a classic, rags to riches, fairy tale. He portrays it as a biblical version of Pride and Prejudice, where love wins in the end and the king is an ancient Persian version of Mr Darcy.

But the story of Esther is not a romance. It's the story of a young woman, who is part of an exiled and oppressed people, being taken against her will to become the sex slave of an evil, unpredictable despot.

Tenney encourages us to imagine God in the role of the King and ourselves in the role of Esther. But God is absolutely nothing like Xerxes. In fact, if you are looking for a God character in the story, the place to look, is Esther herself. Who acts with humility, courage and wisdom. Esther is lot like Jesus.

- What are your thoughts about the notes in the box above?

- What do you admire about Esther?
- In what ways do you think Esther is like Jesus?
- Queen Vashti was of royal birth, according to Jewish tradition.
- Seven days into a party where there was unlimited wine, Xerxes commands Vashti to come to his party so they can 'admire her beauty' and she refuses. What do you think about her decision to refuse?
- Vashti pays dearly for her refusal. Have you experienced situations where women have suffered because they've stood up for themselves?
- According to Herodotus (Greek historian) Persians were very fond of wine, drank a lot of it, and tended to discuss matters of state while drunk. The decisions made in Esther 1:13-21 do sound a lot like they were made by drunk people. What impact do you think this culture of drunkenness might have had?
- It is interesting how threatened the King and the establishment were by a woman who knew her own mind. Is this something you've experienced in your own life?
- The plan to get a new queen seems designed to find someone who will be compliant.
- The early chapters of Esther emphasise the ways in which Esther conforms to what is expected of her as a woman. She is humble and compliant. But to save her people, she had to step out of that gender role and lead. We see the change happen in Esther 4:9-17. Have you experienced times when you needed to step outside of what might be expected of you as a woman? How have you grown as a result?
- Did you notice that all the preparations that the women had to go through, before they met the king, were about their physical appearance? No one was interested in who they were or what they could do. We can see ways in which our culture treats women in similar ways.
- We never find out what happened to the 'spare' women, who were taken to the harem but not chosen to be queen.
- What did you notice about the way that Esther exercised strategy and wisdom?

Xerxes: Dangerous and unpredictable

Historical sources tell stories of just how impulsive and vicious Xerxes could be. When a bridge he'd ordered built, collapsed in a storm, he had the builders beheaded and the sea whipped. When one of his subjects donated a huge sum of money towards a military campaign, he was so grateful that he returned the money along with a large gift of his own, but when that same man asked if one of his sons could be spared military service, Xerxes had the son cut in half. And then had the army march between the pieces of his body.

Esther's incredible courage is all the more remarkable when you consider just how difficult Xerxes could be.

Prayer

In many ways, this is the story of a woman finding her voice. A woman who begins powerless within the structures and culture of her time, who is noted for her humility and obedience, who, by the end of the story is calling the shots.

In what ways have you found your voice? Are you still to find your voice? Do you find yourself restricted? Is God calling you to stand up and make your voice heard in new ways?

Use these thoughts as a jumping off point to share with one another and pray for one another.

Session 6: The Holy Spirit

The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for the Holy Spirit is *ruach*. *Ruach* is actually a feminine word and traditionally the Holy Spirit has been understood to be feminine.

Discussion:

Is this an idea that you have come across before? If so, how has it influenced the way you have viewed and interacted with the Holy Spirit?

If you have understood the Holy Spirit as being feminine and if that has influenced the way that you think about and relate to the Holy Spirit, then you are very much in the minority. We have tended to see the Holy Spirit a person of the trinity who is either without gender, or male. For example, the Holy Spirit is often referred to as 'a gentleman' who would never force or impose himself on us.

Let's have a look at some places in the Bible where we meet the Holy Spirit. And see what difference it makes to our understanding and experience, if we read those passages, thinking of the Holy Spirit as feminine.

Genesis 1:1-2

The word for 'hovering' used here is the same word you would use for a bird hovering over her young.

Psalms 139:7-8

Isaiah 11:32

Isaiah 61:1-4

Zechariah 4:6

Discussion:

What do you notice? What occurs to you as you read those passages?

We often talk about the power of the Holy Spirit. What kind of power is it that the Holy Spirit has and gives to us? How does seeing that power as feminine change the way you think about it?

New birth

John 3:1-8, 1 Peter 1:3

The idea of spiritual birth is central to our faith. When we come to faith, we are birthed by the Spirit. And as we grow in faith, we often experience God birthing new things within us.

There are so many layers to this symbolism. The idea that before finding faith, we are held, tenderly, in the womb of God. The sense that finding faith, becoming aware of God, being born, might not be a comfortable process. It will shake us from comfortable, familiar surroundings into something breathtakingly new. The fact that the effort and the pain and the travail is God's, not ours.

Discussion:

Share your own experiences of coming to faith. In what ways was God holding you tenderly and protectively before you trusted in Jesus?

Can you think of times when you've experienced God birthing something new within you? Is God doing that now? What is God birthing in you at the moment?

Life in the Spirit

As you read these passages together, imagine the Holy Spirit as feminine and see what you notice.

John 14:16-18

Acts 1:1-7

Acts 2:1-21

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Galatians 5:22-26

Discussion:

What did you notice, reading those passages, that you haven't noticed before?

How does what we've explored in this session change the way you view the life of the Spirit?

Prayer:

Take some time to pray for one another.

In particular, if people are comfortable to do so, pray for each person in turn and ask God for a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Session 7: Prophets

Although most of the prophets we come across in the Bible were men, we also meet a number of women in the Bible who were prophets. Although there's not many of them, the women prophets are treated very matter-of-factly. There is no hint of surprise that there should be women in the role of prophet, which suggests that it was fairly normal and that there were plenty of other female prophets who didn't make it into the pages of the Bible.

Isaiah was married to (or at least had a relationship with) a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). Interestingly, it is Isaiah who gives us some of the best portrayals of God as mother and midwife. I can't help wondering if he was influenced by his relationship with the unnamed 'prophetess'.

Here are four accounts of female prophets.

- Read each passage together.
- After each one, share with one another the things that struck you most when reading them. What were the things that stood out for you?

Deborah (and Jael)

Judges 4 and 5:31

It's interesting that Jael turns up in this story. Perhaps having a woman leading Israel helped Jael to feel empowered?

Huldah

Huldah is one my favourite women in the Bible. Not that many people know about her, and she turns up only once. Let's read her story:

2 Kings 22

So Josiah asks five prominent men, including a priest, to enquire of the Lord. And they decide, that at this moment of national crisis, the thing to do is to go and see Huldah. Which tells you something about the kind of woman she must have been. And the extent to which she must have been trusted.

There were certainly other prophets in Judah they could have consulted. We know that Jeremiah was alive at this time (Jeremiah 22:15-16) – but they

didn't go to him. The prophet Zephaniah was also present (Zephaniah 1:1), but they didn't knock at his door. For some reason – perhaps spiritual, perhaps practical – they chose to consult Huldah the prophetess.

Mary and Elizabeth

Luke 1:39-56

Anna

Luke 2:21-38

This passage from Luke is traditionally read in Anglican churches at Candlemas, in February, when Jesus' presentation at the temple is remembered. In 1980, when a new service book was introduced, the reading from Luke was shortened, so that it stopped before we meet Anna. The problem was rectified when the service book was updated again in the year 2000. But for 20 years, Anna quietly disappeared from the liturgy.

Discussion

- What strikes you about all these women? Are there things they have in common?
- What have you sensed God saying to you through these stories?
- In what ways would you like to be more like these women?
- There are many ways of being prophetic. It's not just about 'sharing a word from God'. Prophecy is simply announcing God's truth to the world and we can do that in lots of ways. We can be prophetic in the way that we live and the wisdom we share with other people. In what ways do you see God's truth being shared through one another?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for one another.

Session 8: An unnamed concubine

Scattered throughout the Old Testament are horrific stories of sexual violence. Quite often women appear because they have suffered sexual violence at the hands of men. When their stories are told, it is usually because what happens to them impacts on the lives and the honour of the men in the story, rather than for their own sake. Of those dreadful stories, this is probably the worst.

Culturally, there wasn't really an understanding of rape as being a crime against women in the way that there is today. Women were seen as the property of men, so when adultery was committed or a woman was raped, the severity of the crime was judged by the degree of dishonour suffered by the men involved, who were seen as owning the women. The suffering of the women is sometimes hardly noticed at all. We see this reflected in Old Testament law. (Deuteronomy 22:22-30) And we certainly see it in this story.

Read: Judges 19, 20, 21 and 22 (this will take around 10 minutes)

Discussion

- What is your response to this story? Share your thoughts and feelings.
- What shocks you the most?
- Why do you think the concubine might have left the levite in the first place (Judges 19:2)?
- Imagine her feelings, when she sees the man she escaped appearing over the horizon. And then watches her father welcome him warmly.
- Did you notice that the woman at the centre of this story is both nameless and silent? Even the levite's servant gets to speak, but we hear nothing from the woman.
- Judges 19:22-24 tells us a great deal about the relative worth of men and women in this society.
- Judges 20:9. There's a little detail here that it's important not to miss. The statement '*we'll go up against it as the lot directs*' explains what the story teller means when he says later at various points that they 'enquired of the Lord' and 'the Lord replied'. They were asking questions and drawing lots to get an answer. They then assumed that the answer they received was from God. In fact, God doesn't appear in this story.
- We have seen God intervene to protect Sarah and Hagar and Esther. And yet here God is silent. Events run their course. And hundreds of women are not rescued. Where do you face the reality of God's silence

in your own life and in the lives of people around you? How do you live with that and maintain your faith?

- Judges 21:2-3 It's notable what causes the Israelite men grief in this story and what doesn't seem to bother them at all. Societies have blind spots. There are nearly always groups of people within a society whose suffering goes unnoticed. Where do you think our society has had blind spots in the past? Where do you think our society continues to have blind spots?
- Do you think we would have heard these women's stories at all if it hadn't been for the national crisis that the incident provoked?
- Where in the world do you see women continuing to suffer as a result of their gender?
- Are there ways in which you feel called to respond to those injustices?

Prayer

Take some time to pray together.

Preparation for next time:

Perhaps the most eloquent commentary on the horrific story we've just read, is that we can turn over the page and read the story of Ruth. Ruth lived in the time of the judges. This is a beautiful story about good people living ordinary lives.

Read the book of Ruth before next time. It's really short and will take about 20 minutes to read.

Session 9: Ruth

Share your thoughts and feelings about this story:

- What did you notice?
- What stood out for you?
- What did you sense God saying to you, as you read the story?

This is such a rich and beautiful story, that you will probably find that sharing with one another what you discovered, will give you plenty to talk about.

Use the thoughts below if you want to or need to.

Further thoughts to prompt discussion:

- Ruth's story is one of reconciliation. Although the Israelites and the Moabites had become enemies, the Moabites were descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. Through the simple faithfulness of these women, living compassionately and courageously in difficult times, there is a bringing together.
- In Israel, there must have been thousands of women living simple, honest lives. Women like Ruth, whose stories we can only guess at. But the implication from the text is plain. Here is a story worth hearing. Ruth must be remembered. It is not just the male ancestors who matter, it is not only the men's stories that count, it is the women's too. Ordinary lives matter.
- The story of Ruth is a beautiful window into the rich lives of women in Old Testament times that we otherwise hardly glimpse.
- I love the little detail that Naomi doesn't tell Ruth and Orpah to return to their father's homes, but to their mother's homes. Here, uniquely, is a story in the Bible seen through the eyes of women.
- The voices of the women in this book are much stronger than that of the men. It is Ruth and Naomi who take the initiative in securing Ruth's marriage to Boaz. And we hear the voices of 'the women' in a way that we don't elsewhere in the Bible.
- We especially hear the voice of the women in Ruth 4:13-17. I love the fact that they declare to Naomi that Ruth, who loves her, 'is better to you than seven sons...' And it seems to be the women who name Ruth's son.
- We can clearly see the impact of gender based discrimination on the lives of women in this story.
- Ruth and Naomi are strong, resilient women but throughout the story it is obvious that their place in society is not secure without a husband. Naomi helps Ruth to propose to Boaz because, as she explains, 'I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for.'

- Boaz effectively acquires Ruth as part of a business deal involving buying a piece of land.
- It tells you something about a society when the men working in the fields need to be specifically told by their boss not to molest a woman gathering grain in the fields.
- Both Naomi and Boaz mention that Ruth was at risk of harm while she was gleaning.
- The laws about rights to gleaning were designed to protect the poor from destitution. It seems that the women taking advantage of those rights were frequently faced with a choice between starvation and sexual molestation.
- Ruth's son, Obed, is the grandfather of David. There is evidently much more to say about David's great grandmother than either his grandfather or father. It is Ruth's story we hear. A woman. A foreigner, whose simple courage, resilience and loyalty gain her a place in scripture as the only noteworthy ancestor of David from the time of the Judges.
- Boaz stands in stark relief to the men we encountered in our last story. He notices Ruth and wants to know who she is. (Actually, that's not true. His question is not 'who is she?' It's 'who does that young woman belong to?') The fact that he has noticed a poor woman gleaning in his fields and actively takes an interest in her suggests that this a kind and decent man.
- Unlike the levite in the last story, who denied his concubine a voice, or his protection, Boaz gives Ruth dignity and respects her personhood. He offers her protection.
- Boaz is modest. When Ruth asks him why he is showing her such kindness, he very honourably puts his actions down to her good character: "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law..."

Session 10: Bathsheba

Misogynistic cultures everywhere manage to do a conjuring trick where they render women powerless and create environments where women are likely to be subject to sexual violence and at the same time, portray women as dangerous temptresses. Men need to beware, because there are immoral women, lying in wait around every corner, wanting to lure men astray (the warnings against adultery in the book of Proverbs show us that these attitudes were also present in old testament culture).

At its worst, this makes women not only the victims of violence, but also guilty of making it happen. We've seen that in our own culture when victims of rape have had their sexual lives picked apart in court by defence lawyers who want to imply that they must be responsible for what happened to them.

There are some women in the Bible who theologians and commentators over the centuries have regarded as sexually immoral, when that isn't what we read in the text at all. Bathsheba is one of those women.

Read:

2 Samuel 11:1 - 12:24, 1 Kings 1:1-31 and 1 Kings 2:13-25

Share your thoughts and feelings about the story.

Prompts for discussion, if needed:

- Over the centuries, many commentators and theologians have cast Bathsheba as an adulterous temptress, who captured David's heart by deliberately bathing naked on the roof. What are your thoughts about that?
- Although traditionally, Bathsheba is imagined to be on the roof, actually, we only know that David was on the roof (2 Samuel 11:2) and that he could see her. The idea of her being on the roof makes her seem more of an exhibitionist.
- We're told that Bathsheba had purified herself from her uncleanness (2 Samuel 11:4). That tells us both that she was following the ritual laws and that she had just had a period, which means that the child she was carrying had to be David's.
- Many commentators have held Bathsheba responsible, because she went with the messengers of the king (2 Samuel 11:4). But firstly, she

couldn't have known what the king intended when he sent the messengers and even if she did have some idea, she wouldn't have had much choice but to respond to the king's summons.

- Who does God hold responsible?
- Who does Nathan portray as the victim in his story? What does that tell you about the culture at the time?
- Bathsheba's strength of character begins to become evident right from 2 Samuel 11:5. She would have been in an incredibly dangerous position if Uriah came home and found her pregnant with a child that was not his. So she takes action to hold David accountable.
- Bathsheba didn't choose to end up in the palace as one of David's wives. But once there, she becomes a shrewd political operator. She works with Nathan to secure the throne for Solomon, despite the fact that David has several sons who are older than Solomon.
- She ends up holding quite a lot of power. (1 Kings 2:19)
- Adonijah asking for Abishag as his wife is not an innocent request. She would have been regarded as one of David's wives. In asking to marry her, Adonijah was making a claim for the kingdom. Which is exactly how Solomon interprets it. Bathsheba seems either to have uncovered a plot, or is coming up with a reason for Solomon to have him executed. Either way, she is helping Solomon make his position as king secure.

Session 11: The woman at the well

We are going to explore this story through imaginative prayer, as we did the story of Hagar.

Get two people to read the passage aloud, so that you hear it twice.

John 4:1-42

- On the first reading, just listen to the story.
- On the second reading, begin to picture what would have been happening. Start to imagine the sights and sounds and smells.
- Put down your Bibles and allow around 20 minutes of silence. In that time, imagine yourself in the story. You might be observing, or you might be one of the characters. Run through the story in your imagination. Don't worry if you're not that great at visualising things. Some people have quite vivid imaginations, others might just get vague impressions. Just go with it. Allow God to speak to you as you do and to lead you into prayer.
- Manage your time, so that once you've finished your imagining and praying, you've got a few minutes to make some notes on your experience and to write down anything that God has said to you.
- Take some time to share your reflections and experiences with one another.
- Allow your conversation to lead you into prayer together.

Prompts for discussion, if needed:

- The woman at the well is a fascinating character. There are lots of ways to view her but traditionally we have seen only one. The immoral woman, shunned by village and saved by her encounter with Jesus.
- During the conversation, it transpires that she's had five husbands and is now living with a sixth man. The spin that is usually put on this is that she's immoral, the assumption being that she's responsible for the number of husbands she's had. But this is a culture where the people with the power are men. It's not very plausible that she's been the one dumping the blokes in her life. She has suffered widowhood, divorce or both.
- It's often assumed that she's at the well in the heat of the day is because her reputation for immorality has led her to be shunned by the other women in the village. Well, possibly. But again, that's an assumption. She's certainly got a good enough reputation for everyone to listen and believe her when she tells them about Jesus.

- It says something about her that she's managed to get remarried so many times, in a society where she could so easily have been regarded as disgraced and unfit to be married.
- Living out of wedlock at this point in her life, might be her only option in a culture where widows were often destitute.
- It is likely that she's had a horribly difficult life, marked by abuse, tragedy and misfortune. It's certainly been eventful and she was probably quite resourceful.
- You certainly need a well of personal strength and resilience to get through a life like that and still be the bold, level headed and passionate person we meet in her conversation with Jesus. She comes across as intelligent and assertive. Not only that, but she had the passion and energy to go and tell her whole village about Jesus. And the reputation and charisma to persuade the women in the village to come and meet him for themselves.

Session 12: Mary

Discussion:

Start by sharing your thoughts about Mary. Has she been a significant figure for you? Or not? Has anyone been part of the Catholic tradition? How has that influenced the way you see Mary? Do you think about her much? How do you imagine her?

Who was Mary?

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a uniquely significant figure in Christian tradition. The Orthodox church calls her the Theotokos - which means "God bearer". Both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches believe that she remained a virgin after Jesus was born and that she was sinless (they disagree about exactly how sinless she was) and remained a virgin. In those traditions she is venerated. Mary has provided some feminine balance in the spiritual experience of many people in these traditions. If God is portrayed as an angry and frightening Father figure, who wouldn't want to talk to Mother Mary instead?

The protestant tradition (of which we are a part) has not been at all happy about the veneration of Mary, which it has condemned as idol worship and therefore a really bad idea. Protestant churches have tended to react against the Catholic view of Mary, which they would view as heresy, by ignoring her altogether.

This has meant that culturally, it has been the Catholic tradition that has had most influence over the way we picture Mary. Sinless, submissive and sexless. The one who said 'yes' to God. Calmly dressed in blue and wearing a halo. She presents an ideal that none of us is ever going to be able to attain.

Today we're going to push aside the layers of centuries of tradition and myth and paintings and statues, and take a look at the woman we meet in the pages of the gospel. A woman who is not sinless (as far as we know) or a perpetual virgin (she had quite a few children) but a real person, living a real life.

Becoming the mother of Jesus

This is a very well known passage. As you read it this time, do your best to imagine that it's the first time you've heard this story. We don't know exactly how old Mary would have been, but we know that she was young. Probably a teenager. As you ponder these stories, see them through Mary's eyes.

Luke 1:26-56

- What stands out for you from this passage?
- What do you notice about Mary's character? What kind of person do you think she is?
- What do we discover about Mary's faith?
- What do you notice about Mary's relationship with Elizabeth?
- Share your experiences of spiritual friendships with other women.

Luke 2:1-39, Matthew 2:9-23

- What stands out for you from these passages?
- What challenges did Mary face?
- Do you notice how many journeys Mary goes on? As a pregnant woman and as the mother of a very young child. Often travelling away from her village where there would have been the support and friendship of other women. What might that have been like?
- How do you think these experiences might have shaped Mary?
- What do you sense God might be saying to you through these passages?

One of the things that strikes me from these passages is how often Mary is mentioned, when she could so easily have been missed out. She doesn't melt into the background. Maybe Mary is Luke's source for these stories (Luke 2:19). Maybe she was a forceful enough personality to make her presence felt.

Losing Jesus

The next time we meet Mary, she's in her mid to late twenties. Jesus is twelve. And she is now the mother of multiple children. We don't know exactly how many siblings Jesus had, but we know that by the time he was an adult, he had four brothers and some sisters (**Matthew 13:55-56**). So you can just imagine this trip to Jerusalem with multiple small children...

Imaginative reflection

Luke 2:41-51

Ask someone to read the passage. Then have five minutes of silence together. In that time, imagine that you are sitting with Mary and she is telling you this story as she remembers it.

Share your reflections with one another afterwards.

The wedding at Cana

So now we meet Mary in her mid forties. She has probably been widowed by this point. And she's probably a grandmother.

John 2:1-11

- What do we find out about Mary's character in this passage?
- What do we discover about how people in the community might have viewed her?
- What do we discover about her relationship with Jesus?

Worrying about Jesus

Mark 3:20-21, 31-34

- What do you think it would have been like, for Mary, seeing Jesus engaging in his ministry?
- I love the fact that it's Jesus not having time to eat (verse 20) that spurs Mary into action.

At the cross

John 19:25-27

It's impossible to imagine the agony of Mary in this moment. Or the strength that it would have taken to be there.

I wonder why Jesus links up Mary and John? There were plenty of other brothers to provide for Mary, who would have had a duty to do so. Perhaps there was something about the relationship between John and Mary that meant they would benefit from being with one another.

In the upper room

Acts 1:14, 2:1-21

Mary was there at Pentecost. In the upper room. And the woman who, as a pregnant teenager was praising God and prophesying to Elizabeth about the child in her womb, as a woman in her forties, is on the streets of Jerusalem, together with all her other sons, filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaiming his resurrection.

Reflection

- How has your perception of Mary changed, through this study?

- What has been particularly meaningful for you?
- What have you learnt from Mary about the life of faith?
- What do you sense God has been saying to you?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for one another. And for other women that you know.

