

Religious Education Support
Second Level Support Service
Jesus' Encounters with Women

The following material is adapted from 'Women in the New Testament' by Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, 2001, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press

Please note that the following article is background information only on this topic. It in no way constitutes a sample or exemplary answer on this topic.

In the Gospels we note that each woman who approaches Jesus does so in faith, and each one is changed after meeting Jesus. Each change involved a leaving behind of one situation in favour of another.

'The women Jesus encounters move into the Church's memory from an environment that barely distinguished them as shadows' (Getty-Sullivan, p43).

The Gospel stories involving women are not strictly just about women. They are more about Jesus and about how his message of the Kingdom of God affects and includes all people. However, reading such stories gives us an insight into the situation of women in the society of 1st century Palestine.

'Many of the women mentioned in the Gospels are first introduced in terms of disabilities: one has been haemorrhaging for twelve years, another has been badly bent over, crippled for eighteen years. If women are further described, it is most often in relationship to a man e.g. the daughter of Jairus, or the mother of Zebedee's sons. Sometimes women are referred to as coming from a certain place such as the widow of Nain or simply the Syrophenician woman. A few are even named, such as Mary of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala, and Martha & Mary of Bethany. When we hear the stories of these women we are struck at how very different is Jesus' interaction with them than what was expected of him or of them' (p43)

Jesus as prophet:

In the Old Testament illness was seen as a prelude to death, those who are ill are a step closer to dying. **'Not a doctor but a prophet was to be summoned'** (p43). It was hoped that the holy person could offer healing, acting as the agent of God, channelling God's healing to the suffering person. Old Testament stories involving suffering include leprosy...the sorrow of the infertile woman...Saul's disturbed spirit (possible mental illness?)...Elijah & David's depression. The doctor was not called here, but the prophet. The prophet advised the one suffering to pray to God and ask that God would have a change of heart and allow the person to live, not die. Prophets were understood as having the power to speak to people on behalf of God, interpreting God's will. The word of the prophet was efficacious – affecting what it says.

One Old Testament image of Jesus is that he was a prophet, coming to illustrate the meaning of the kingdom he comes too announce. One feature of this image is his power to perform miracles. Miracles had three basic elements:

1. A serious, often insurmountable problem
2. Intervention / word / action of Jesus
3. Evidence that the miracle had taken place

In each case the person is transformed by the miracle.

The Widow of Nain – Luke 7:11-17

The widow is desperately poor since her only son is dead and about to be buried. Jesus is moved by compassion. He touches the coffin and speaks. The crowd is awe-struck and proclaim 'A great prophet has arisen in our midst...God has visited his people'.

Luke was writing around 85 CE and probably relied on Mark and the Q source for the inspiration and oral tradition behind this story. Interestingly, Lk 7:1-10 deals with Jesus' cure of the centurion's servant. This reflects Luke's technique called 'step parallelism' involving a comparison / contrast of events. The audience are allowed to see the heightened significance of the subsequent event, using this technique. **'This technique escalates the Gospel's claims about the power of Jesus, which reaches even beyond curing a person who is seriously ill. Jesus can also restore a person to life and 'save' not only a son but also his grief-stricken mother as well'** (p47).

In Jesus' inaugural address in Lk 4:16-30 he described his mission as working on behalf of the poor, the sick, the blind and the lame. He puts a challenge to his listeners: 'Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing' (Lk 4:21)

'Luke has a tendency to 'pair' stories of men and of women as if to insist that both are equally included in the blessings of the messianic kingdom of God' (p48).

Jesus is portrayed as more than a prophet by Luke, yet he is also seen as one in a direct line of prophets. Luke repeatedly emphasises this point. The story about the poor widow of Nain evokes the prophet Elijah's resuscitation of the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 7:8-24. In Lk 24:19 Jesus is called a prophet and is explicitly identified with Elijah and Elisha in Lk 4:24, 27. Interestingly, Jesus rejects this role for himself, pointing out that John the Baptist is the last and greatest of the prophets.

The story about the widow of Nain sees her about to bury her only son. The fact that he was the only son is important. **'Along with the orphan, the widow becomes, in the Old Testament tradition, a powerful symbol of the limits of human justice and the need for God's help'** (p50). The widow symbolises the poor who are completely dependent on God. Despite the presence of the crowd and mourners in the story, the widow **'appears isolated in her sorrow and despair'** (p50). Her only son, and therefore her only hope, was dead. Many women had been left as widows due to various wars, despite the fifth commandment. Various laws developed to provide for the rights of men and of those women and children who were in men's care. **'Such is the legal basis of a patriarchal society. But the figure of a childless widow, like that of a parentless child, signifies one outside the pale of law, without recourse to defences. The childless widow represents the extreme example of defencelessness'** (p50).

In first century Palestine the custom was that a woman was passed from the care of her father to her husband and then to her sons. Women at that time had no right to inheritance, unless they had no brothers. Neither were they permitted to act as witnesses. They did not pronounce any vow in marriage and they could not initiate divorce proceedings. **'It was a great shame to be divorced, as it was to be widowed or without children. A woman without father, husband or son to care for her was destitute and without any means of support. Thus Luke can describe a truly desperate person when he says that this widow from Nain was met as she was burying her 'only son''** (p51). It was seen as especially important in marriage to have at least one son. It meant that if widowed a woman would still have a means of income and ongoing physical protection. Sons represented prestige. Leah, for example, who had been shamefully barren, rejoiced when she had two sons. 'Her joy and satisfaction were great when she became the mother of six strong boys' (p51) – see Genesis 29:31-35; 30:14-21

The widow of Nain does not speak in this story. She does not plead with Jesus. She is simply there with her son's lifeless body. **'She appears devoid of meaningful expression, unable even to formulate her needs or prayers. The widow is like the Israelites in Egypt, so weighed down by their misery that they could only groan in wordless pain (Exodus 2:23-24)'** (p52).

Luke's story does not mention faith – it is not asked for by Jesus nor is it offered by the widow. The initiative to raise the widow's son came entirely from Jesus. After the miracle, **'the woman still does not utter sound. There is no thanks no proclamation of faith'** (p52). Jesus' initiative was taken when he was moved with compassion. He was not swayed by a request from the widow either for herself or for her son. **'The focus is on Jesus and what his actions mean for his identity. This miracle is attributed to the compassion of 'The Lord'...It elicits a fundamental Christological affirmation from the crowd: Jesus is a 'great prophet'. In Jesus, God has visited the people'** (p52). Jesus is moved by compassion and instructs the widow 'Do not weep'. In Luke's telling of the story it feels as if only Jesus and the woman are present, **'united by their sad emotions – hers of sorrow, his or compassion'** (p52).

Luke's true objective in including this story is Christological. In a sense, Luke's audience is invited to join in the reaction of the crowd, which upon seeing the miracle exclaim 'A great prophet has arisen in our midst', and 'God has visited his people' (Lk 17:6). The challenge is nevertheless put before the reader: 'What verdict do you render about Jesus as a result of witnessing this miracle?' (p53)

**The Raising of Jairus's Daughter
Lk 5:21-24 / Mt 9:18-19, 23-26 / Lk 8:40-42**

These two stories are combined. Mark tends to use a technique known as 'intercalation' whereby he inserts or sandwiches one story with another, thus facilitating better understanding of the two stories. Each of the two stories helps interpret the other. These two stories involving women restored by Jesus form a unit in each of the synoptic Gospels. Here are some of the parallels:

Story of Jairus's Daughter	Story of the Woman with the Haemorrhage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A young woman is involved ➤ Her influential father intercedes ➤ She is 12 years old ➤ Circumstances render her unclean ➤ She becomes a corpse ➤ As good as dead, restored by the 'touch' of Jesus ➤ Theme: the opposite options of faith & fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A woman is involved ➤ She approaches Jesus from behind, fearfully & secretly ➤ She has had the bleeding for 12 years ➤ Circumstances render her unclean ➤ Blood was unclean & untouchable ➤ As good as dead, restored by the 'touch' of Jesus ➤ Theme: the opposite options of faith & fear

The cures in these two stories are public affairs, witnessed by many, yet the cure and resuscitation are also in word and private. Each provokes a mixed reaction from witnesses.

Jairus's daughter had reached the age of marriage. At that time arranged marriages were the norm. A year long initiation into marriage was usually begun and sealed with the offering of a mohar / bridepiece. Offered by the husband-to-be to the family of the bride too compensate them for the loss of services. Thus the father may have faced financial loss as well as social disgrace, in addition to the personal sorrow of his daughter's illness and death' (p56). Jairus, a synagogue leader, intercedes on behalf of one who is little valued by society at that time. Women bear a strong presence in this story: the two who receive the cure, the mother of the girl, the mourners (probably professional female mourners).

The mourners treat Jesus as a fool before it is shown that they in fact are the foolish ones. They know that Jairus's daughter is dead, yet she sits up and is restored to her family and is given something to eat. 'It is also remarkable that he touches her, just as the haemorrhaging woman had touched him. There is power in this contact with Jesus and 'immediately' she is enlivened' (p57).

Jesus was certainly causing somewhat of a disturbance by his words and actions. Mark's Gospel tells how his own family think that he is out of his mind and they wish to take him away, presumably to quieten him. Some wrongly accuse him of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebub. In the raising of Jairus's daughter Jesus restores her to life quietly and in private, 'while the public din of the mockers continues 'outside'. Now it is they who look and act foolishly' (p57-58). The crowds are left outside by Jesus while the disciples and the girl's parents are invited 'in'.

Mk 5:35 shows Jesus as 'teacher'. He teaches with power and authority. **'Mark's Jesus does not speak much, but he teaches with powerful deed, demonstrating that he acts with the authority and power of God'** (p58). This is in contrast with other leaders.

Jesus appears almost foolish in the stories cited. In the story of the woman with the haemorrhage he appears confused, whereas he is laughed at by the crowd in the story of Jairus's daughter. In the end, he commands people not to tell what he has done. This is really an impossible and illogical order. Mark says that the crowd were commanded to tell no one. Maybe this was because the identity of Jesus would only truly be revealed on the cross. **'At a deep level Mark is weaning his readers away from hope that Jesus will preserve them from harm through miracles...Faith is not to be dependent on miracles...Miracle-faith is far too fragile and conditional'** (p59-60).

'The young girl, like the haemorrhaging woman, was considered outside the boundaries of cleanliness and of holiness. But they are not included in the righteousness that is found by faith in Jesus' (p62).

Jairus's daughter
and
The widow's son

When we read these two stories together, one lasting impression is that Jesus demonstrates that girls as well as boys are to be cherished.

The Woman healed of a Haemorrhage

Mk 5:25-34 / Mt 9:20-22 / Lk 8:43-48

This story should be read in the context of the story of the Raising of Jairus's daughter. The woman is not named and she is ostracized by her illness. The struggle between faith and fear are evident in both stories. **'Both women are introduced in terms of their extreme religious and social poverty'** (p63). One is a young girl who dies. The other has an illness that bankrupts her on many levels – financially, socially, spiritually and physically. **'The status of both is changed by their encounter with Jesus. The isolation and sadness of their families are transformed into joy and celebration when the women are restored to them. Both stories reflect a degraded status of women and how this is rejected by Jesus'** (p63).

In first century Palestine women were almost completely confined to domestic duties, **'perhaps more so than at any other time in Jewish history'** (p63). The reason for this lay not within Judaism itself but within the defensive stance that Judaism necessarily adopted as it struggled to maintain its identity during times of enormous hostility to it. Having suffered fifty years of exile in Babylon beginning 587 BCE the returning Jews needed to strengthen their religion and sense of religious identity through the local synagogues. It was here where Judaism was taught and learned. The influence of rabbis grew as they sought to protect Jewish Law. Their oral teaching tradition was held in high regard, on a par with that of Moses. Rabbis focused their preaching in particular on matters relating to how the Law could be applied to daily living. Parents had a duty to teach this to their children so that the tradition and the gift of the Torah would be passed on through the generations.

However, **'the development of rabbinic legal tradition heightened the inequality that existed between men and women. A man and woman, even husband and wife, were not to speak on the street if they wandered out together'** (p64). One Pharisee (& Jewish philosopher) called Philo said that women are best suited to the indoor life and should not stray from the house, 'within which the middle door is taken by the maidens as their boundary, and the outer door by those who have reached full womanhood' (see Philo, *Special Laws*, 3.169, trans. Loeb Classical Library, 7.581; quoted in Donald P. Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1975) 74-75). Philo goes on to say that 'A woman then should not be a busybody, meddling with affairs outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion. She should not show herself off like a vagrant in the streets before the eyes of other men, except when she has to go to the Temple.' Similarly, the first century historian, Josephus, presents what we might consider a rather demeaning picture of women: 'The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man.' (see Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 74-75) Despite this cultural context we see Jesus treat women in a very different manner.

'The story of Jairus's daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage raise the issue of ritual 'cleanness' and 'uncleanness'. It is truly significant that Jesus said and did what he said and did in order to liberate us. And that is also why the Gospels recount Jesus' words and deeds' (Getty-Sullivan, p64). These stories are also about salvation. To understand this we must grasp the cultural context that made the woman with the haemorrhage unclean. Circumstances that render one unclean included contact with blood and contact with a corpse. **'Since the combined stories of the daughter of Jairus and the haemorrhaging women involve these forms of uncleanness, we need to investigate this issue'** (p65).

This woman is ill because of an unnatural flow of blood for twelve years, which rendered her weak. **'She is continuously 'unclean', ostracized and isolated because of religious connotations of the bleeding that plagues her. Further, she has been impoverished at the hands of impotent doctors, unable too help her. She has gone from bad to worse. Although she is a social outcast, she has heard about Jesus. Her situation has made her fearful and suspicious of false claims. But she has hope'** (p66). She has no one to intercede for her. She approached Jesus secretly, from behind. She desires to push herself through the crowd in the hope of simply touching his cloak. Although unsure of herself, her hope and confidence is in Jesus.

Jesus appears somewhat confused. He feels the power leave him but seems not to know where it has gone or to whom. He asks 'Who has touched my clothes?' (Mk 5:30). He in fact offers the woman a chance to identify herself and acknowledge the change that has occurred in her. Jesus waits for a response. We see the first bout of courage in the woman being replaced now with fear & trembling. She prostrates herself in the presence of Jesus. This gesture identifies her as a believer. **'She pours out the whole truth. The woman finally has an identity, knowing herself not only as someone in need of mercy and healing but as one who has received these'** (p67). Jesus acknowledges that this encounter has transformed her. **'He affirms her new identity, as one born of faith. Jesus says to her, 'Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace''** (Mk 5:34) (p67).

Menstruating women were seen as taboo in ancient Judaism and in Near East cultures at that time. 'Despite the lack of understanding of the precise physiology of menstruation and conception, many societies came to associate menstruation with death because the lack of menstruation meant conception and life' (Rachel Biala, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources*, New York: Schocken Books, 1984, p147).

The concepts of cleanness and holiness were bound up with the concept of the mysteriousness of God. As God was divine and holy, respect and reverence was required to approach God. **'Strict boundaries separate the holy from the impure or contaminated. So, for example, a veil covers the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary where the ark of the covenant is kept. Only the high priest entered once a year into this innermost holy place'** (Getty-Sullivan, p67). The

early Christian community also posed a threat to Judaism as they did not always agree on which books were sacred and belonged to the Canon of the Scriptures. The Jewish Temple was destroyed in 70CE by the Roman army. The surrounding hostilities meant that Judaism had to define itself in the face of much opposition. Thus the language of purity was kept for the realm of the holy, **‘a concept almost synonymous with purity or cleanness’** (p68) Purity involved what was unstained, clean, innocent, blameless and holy. Pollution / impurity included that which was stained, defiled, blemished, unclean, profane. Strict boundaries separated the sacred from the profane. The sacred was not to be violated by the profane. Certain rituals were carried out in order to enter the realm of the sacred. For example the Temple priest would ritually wash himself and abstain from sex in order to purify himself to prepare to participate in the holy act of offering sacrifice in the Temple. A person healed of leprosy would present himself to the priest so that his healing could be verified and thanksgiving offered. Thereafter he could enter the realm of the ordinary, having been freed from the ostracizing taboo of a **‘social and spiritual limbo’** (p69). A woman would bathe herself in a *mikveh* after her period. More prolonged purification was required after childbirth, and it was doubled if the woman gave birth to a girl. ‘Women were considered ‘less clean’ than men and ‘a perceived threat of pollution to men’ (see Joanna Dewey, ‘The Gospel of Mark,’ in *Searching the Scriptures*, 470-509, at 481). Double standards existed in matters related to women’s practice of religious laws and duties. Women were not required to go to the Temple, and they were only permitted partial access there. ‘Their religious obligations were like those of slaves. The reasoning seems to have been that women, like slaves, were not responsible for their own time’ (see Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 75). However, they were obliged to adhere to laws of ritual purity, including remaining in seclusion during menstruation or undergoing the rituals of purification after childbirth. Strict adherence to these laws was required in order to preserve the purity of men.

Women were secluded for seven days (the time of a normal female period). This meant that they were ostracized / excluded from normal interactions with others at this time, as women were seen as ‘unclean’ at this time. The fact that this woman was haemorrhaging for twelve years rendered her particularly and permanently unclean. She could not perform the *mikveh* and return to normal social interaction. Therefore her illness did not just have physical symptoms but social implications for her. If she was single, she would not be allowed to marry. If she was married her illness would give her husband grounds for divorce. **‘She would be expelled from her home, cut off from her family. We are struck by the loneliness of her situation, much like the stark isolation and despair of the widow of Nain. Ironically, both women meet Jesus in the midst of a huge crowd. The irony heightens the drama. And their restoration to social status, including a return to their families, is an integral part of the story’** (pp69-70). The widow’s son is raised and given back to his mother. Jairus’s daughter is raised and given back to her father. The woman with the haemorrhage is completely healed. We are not told that she is restored to her own people. Nevertheless, her healing certainly has social implications. The woman’s act of prostration shows that she knows she is in the presence of holiness. Mk 5:25-26 uses the words ‘suffered greatly’ and ‘afflicted’ of her. These words are also used in Mark’s account of Jesus’ Passion and journey to Jerusalem. Luke offers another perspective. He says that the woman openly confessed why she had touched Jesus and how she was healed immediately ‘in the presence of all the people’ (Lk 8:47). **‘Witness to faith is the basis of true discipleship, according to Luke. He concludes this story with high praise for the woman and reassurance from Jesus: “Daughter, your faith have saved you; go in peace” ‘** (Lk 8:48) (pp70-71). This woman’s witness is not valid in Judaism and is rejected by early Christian leaders such as Peter, yet the witness of the woman is confirmed by Jesus. Matthew includes something of the woman’s inner thought process when he writes “If only I can touch...” (Mt 9:21). This contrasts with Jairus’s “Come and lay your hands on her” (Mt 9:18). It seems that Jairus may assume some magical power of Jesus. The woman’s faith, in Matthew’s account, is fundamental to her healing.

A Woman Judged Forgiven

Jn 7:53-8:11

In this story we see a woman accused of adultery brought before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees. 'Jesus' 'judgment' is not a condemnation of the woman but an invitation to a totally new life free of sin. The encounter between Jesus and the woman is an opportunity for her to begin a new life 'from now on' (pp99-100). There is of course a double standard regarding the punishment for adultery for men and women. Here, 'Jesus opposes certain authoritative defenders of the Mosaic tradition' (p101). One of the main charges against Jesus is that he forgave sin by his own authority, whereas in Jewish Law only God had the authority to forgive sin. 'The whole point is in the encounter between Jesus and the woman who are left alone, centre stage' (p102). The background to this story sees Jesus alone at the Mount of Olives praying. Then he moves to the Temple where he is teaches and is surrounded by crowds. Jesus' opponents try to trap him by catching him out in a conflict concerning Jewish Law. The woman is in fact used by the scribes and Pharisees as an object or a means of getting at Jesus. This changes when Jesus speaks to the woman. The question is asked. "What do you say about her?" They are trying to find cause to act against Jesus by catching him out. The woman is passive, exposed and defenceless at this stage in the story while Jesus' opponents are active. The opponents seem to outnumber Jesus and the woman. The crowds witness the event. Jesus uses his finger to draw on the ground. We might well ask was Jesus bored or disinterested at this stage. He even turns away and ignores the opponents. He moves from him sitting posture to stand up, taking charge of the situation and challenging the opponents "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone." Interestingly, the opponents move away, one by one, beginning with the elders, as if responding to the call of conscience.

We may wonder indeed how it came to be that the woman was even caught in the act of adultery in the first place. There is the possibility that she was 'set up' so that she could be taken away and used as a way of getting at Jesus. Where is the man she was with, and why is he not also prepared for execution by stoning? Knowing that the accusers were expert in the Jewish Law, Jesus knows that each one is guilty of sin and therefore has no right to condemn this woman. All are in need of God's mercy. This relates to Mt 7:1 'Judge not and you will not be judged'. The crowd also seem to acknowledge their own sin, and they move away from the scene. The woman does not utter a word either in her defence or as a plea for mercy. Jesus simply asks "Has no one condemned you?". In addressing her for the first time, Jesus personalises her, 'inviting her to take an active part in her own story, to respond. She is transformed'(p104). She replies ".No one, kyrie" (sir) to which Jesus replies "Neither will I condemn you". John's perspective is that God judges not by condemnation but by salvation. Jesus tells her "Go, and from now on, sin no more". The gift of new life has been offered to the woman. Jesus is offering her eternal life by faith. The encounter transformed the woman – yet we do not know her story thereafter. Nevertheless, the encounter proved to be a turning point for the woman, a turning from the path of sin that leads to death to the path of faith that leads to life.

Some other examples of Jesus' encounters with women:

- The Healing of Simon's Mother – in – Law Mk1:29-31; Mt 8:14-15; Lk 4:38-39
- A Crippled woman can stand erect Lk 13:10-17; Mk 3:1-6; Lk 6:6-11; Lk 14:1-6; Mt 12:9-14
- The Syrophenician Woman Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28
- The Samaritan Woman Jn 4:4-42
- The Woman who Showed Great Love Lk 7:36-50
- Daughters of Jerusalem Lk 23:26-31, 48
- Mary Magdalene Lk 8:3; Mk 16:9; Jn 20:1-2, 11-18; Mk 15:40, 47; Mk 16:1; Mt 27:56, 61; 28:1; Jn 19:25
- Martha and Mary Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:1-44
- The Poor Widow Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4
- The Woman of Bethany who Anointed Jesus Mk 14:3-9; Mt 26:6-13; Jn 12:1-12
- The Mother of Jesus Jn 2:1-12; 19:24-30

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