



Luke 8:1–3

After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; 3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to sup-

port them out of their own means.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

It's always interesting to note the details the ancient Gospel writers place in their accounts. Here as Luke moves to record Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, he pauses at the start of chapter 8 to remind us who was with Jesus. There were the 12 disciples – whom we've already met – and there were several women. Women who are given names, who are marked out specifically in this written account – Mary (called Magdalene), Joanna, Susanna and a bunch of others. Apart from being provided the status of being mentioned by

name we are also told these women were supporting Jesus financially in his mission to declare the kingdom of God.

You can't read the Gospel of Luke and miss the prominent place that women play in Jesus' mission. From the focus on Mary and Elizabeth in chapters 1–2, to these women supporting Jesus as he teaches, and of course the prominent place women play in the passion narrative – last at the cross, first to the tomb. It appears that God's kingdom does not hold all the cultural boundaries that human cultures do. And this is good news for many – especially women in the ancient world.

It is difficult to express the cultural divide between the genders in the ancient world, but it was vast. One of the most radical

aspects of the Christian community was that it did not abide by the Greco-Roman cultural barriers that were set in place. Indeed it was the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Galatians:

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In his social history of the early Church, *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist at the University of Washington, Rodney Stark noted the radical, counter-cultural community the early Christian church was for

many, especially women. Christians did not support female infanticide. Granted, Christians didn't support the killing of any babies, but that worked to the advantage of girls who were often the focus of such a practice. The Christian community called men to the same sexual standards of fidelity as their women. Stark provides evidence that women in the Christian community married later in life – around the age of 16–19, whereas the cultural practice at the time was the forced marriages of younger girls around the age of 12 to older men. There was safety for women in the Christian community. Should they be widowed, women in the early church enjoyed substantial advantages. Whilst the Roman emperor Augustus had set a fine for widows who failed to remarry within 2 years (and in doing so were forced to

give whatever wealth they had from their previous marriage to their new husband), the Christian community placed no such pressure on widows and instead allowed them space and support. When it came to status, women served as deacons across many early churches and enjoyed equal status with men. Whilst in the Greco-Roman setting women were not allowed to give evidence in a court of law, the disciples saw no problem with recording the women as the first to the tomb of Jesus' resurrection – reliable and trustworthy witnesses with no concern of gender.

Whilst Jesus and the apostles never sought to deny the differences between the genders, they were revolutionary in the way that they refused to let gender isolate one from participation in the com-

munity. There were no double standards and in effect Jesus was forming God's new kingdom people who would be a light to the world.

Rodney Stark begins his chapter with the words:

“Amidst contemporary denunciations of Christianity as patriarchal and sexist, it is easily forgotten that the early church was so especially attractive to women because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large.”

Think & Pray

It is difficult to express the impact that

Jesus' community has had on our world. Women treated as equals, marriages built on fidelity, leadership driven by service, the emergence of humility as a virtue and the Son of God dying for his enemies so that he may pay the price for their sin and reunite them with their God.

It is important that Luke notes the names of the women supporting Jesus on his mission journey. Because they were considered worthy of such naming as sisters in the family of God that Jesus was ushering in.

I resonate with the Apostle Paul who wrote in Romans 1, 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel.' This is the God we serve, this is the community we seek to be and we have the opportunity to continue to be a light

to the city God has placed us in.