

# We have to change course.

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John 4: 5-42

International Women's Day

Rev Jean Shannon

There is no simple message for International Women's Day and Lent 3 except to say it is a long journey. The purpose of a pilgrimage is not to get you from point A to point B. It is supposed to change you by the process of moving forward. Maybe it is life's detours that are our teachers.

Let's start in ancient scripture and see what impact that has in our modern world.

We heard the women's lament in our reflection<sup>1</sup>. It raised some of the voices of women in the Bible. What do we know about them? And why don't we know more? For a start, it was men who wrote the histories. You see what your unconscious bias sees. I'll give you two examples. When you buy a new car, whatever the make, you suddenly notice all the others of the same brand. If you are a man, you see what men do and say.

Is God a man? No, the Bible tells us the Divine was created without form. Images of God were forbidden in ancient times but the flourishing of medieval art brought us the images that we have in our minds today. Languages limit us to male and female pronouns as intimate speech. Neutral terms like "it" cannot convey the intimacy of God – and so our translations have substantiated our bias. Latin and other Latin based languages like Spanish have a neutral term for pro-generator.

So I'd like to begin by saying unconscious bias is not evil – it is unknowing and we can do something about that.

Genesis begins with the fact that men and women are created equal in the sight of God and of each other...and that WE are the reflected image of God. Woman created out of man is to show the interdependence as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12:

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Such Pickard, from "Women's stories" in *Acorns and Archangels*, edited by Ruth Burgess

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

Jesus earliest followers and many of the financial supporters were women but something happened in the church that began to erase, minimise and negate their status. There was a much more sinister movement that began in the early church and continues today. The same sinister force that began the inquisition in 1292 and pursued and slaughtered Jews and Protestants until 1834.

Women were prominent leaders, Lydia was leader in Philippi; Phoebe was a Deacon in Cenchrea and Junia was an Apostle. Mary Magdalene was a confidant to Jesus, probably a financial supporter and definitely, the Apostles' Apostle. She was the one who carried the word to the men hiding in the upper room. There was no stain on her reputation until Pope Gregory 1 somewhere between 590-604 AD declared her a harlot.

Somewhere along the line Junia's name was changed to a male form. A male name, I am told that did not exist in Greek.<sup>2</sup> It was unimaginable to have a woman apostle.<sup>3</sup>

Lydia was demoted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when titles were added to chapters where her story became "Paul converts Lydia". It was actually a Lydia-alerts-Paul -to-his-own-biases story.

Today we have the story of the Samaritan woman. Think of the sermons you've heard. Now question the bias. Do you think she was an outcast or have men made assumptions about WHY she didn't collect water when they THOUGHT she should? These were assumptions by commentators that we never questioned.

John uses darkness and light as a specific contrast in his writing. Nicodemus came in the dark. The Samaritan woman in the light. John uses a number of other contrasts as a literary device. Jesus spoke to her as a human, not as a Samaritan but as a woman but again, the contrast between man and woman is intentional.

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<sup>2</sup> In Greek like in Hebrew the last 2 letters denote gender...but in Greek, there was no male name like this...they literally made it up.

<sup>3</sup> Last week, a prayer day organiser greeted me as 'Pastor'. I corrected her nominal and said, "reverend", she then introduced me to another woman as pastor. I corrected her again. As I was one of the speakers, when it came time to announce me to the audience – she called me Pastor. In her world, women clearly could not be priests.

Why do we assume she is a harlot instead of a very unlucky widow? “and the man you have now is not your husband” – Could it be her son? If she was a prostitute, would they have even listened to her ramblings much less, believed her claim to have met the messiah? In all these years, in all these sermons, would she/could she have been named as an evangelist instead of a harlot?

Time and time again, the more orthodox the church became, the worse women came off. Generally, the Bible was not dictating what women should do, but in most cases, reported the society as it was at the time. It was taken literally and conveniently, in later centuries<sup>4</sup>.

Much of the Pope’s war on the Cathars 1209-1229 was because women had equal status in leadership.

There is an Ephesian fresco of Paul and a woman preaching as equal leaders – and somewhere in its 1000 year history, someone has gouged out the eyes of the woman.

The Brookings Institute has recently released a report on Christian Nationalism<sup>5</sup> in the USA. The findings confirmed what most people suspected, “White evangelical Protestants are more supportive of Christian nationalism than any other group surveyed”. I care because Christian nationals are very clear about their belief that women must submit to men and that society is diminished when women have more opportunities to work outside the home. They have an almost counter revolutionary belief that men are being ‘punished’ for acting like men. I care because these denominations are very active in Australia in community and politics. These more recent religious groups have taken hold in the Pacific and have seriously altered cultural norms such as traditional land ownership through women and women’s place as elders.

The 1970s feminist wave definitely improved the lives of many. The churches enthusiastically joined in the justice movement but for every revolution, there is a counter revolution. The backlash was well organised. Within a decade, they’d wiped out the memory of Biblical feminism.

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<sup>4</sup> Slavery was normal practice in biblical times and used as an argument NOT to abolish it in later centuries

<sup>5</sup> Much of the information here is from an article by Diana Butler Bass, “The girls are not Okay” published in The Cottage 16 Feb 2023

Complementarianism is a view that men and women have divine ordained – and yet complementary – roles in society, church and the home. They claim scripture is on their side. In recent decades millions of Americans have grown up in churches proclaiming complementarianism is the ancient and faithful view of orthodox Christianity since the time of Jesus and Paul.

It's not. It is a theological term coined in 1987.

We are not alone. The backlash is universal. Look at every fundamentalist and uber-orthodox religion and you will see a war on women whether it is Jewish, Christian or Muslim. One by one, we see women's rights flickering out. It is no fun watching people undo your liberation – especially if you are young.

I marched in 1970 and then again in 1980's and when the ACT government tried to restrict access to reproductive rights, I marched again in the 1990s! When the federal government banned the use of the morning after pill – which is used in hospitals after a rape – I took it to Parliament...and I will do it again. When I left one job in 1983, the male colleague who replaced me got double my salary. You heard it, double. In every executive role I have ever taken, the secretarial support would be removed between my appointment and my arrival.

We know we have made headway – but we also know that in wages, housing and retirement – we have a long way to go. On average, women retire with 30% less super than men but that is an average – that means there are a few women with much more and a great deal with much, much less. I didn't even have the opportunity to contribute to super until I was in my mid-thirties because like many women, I worked casual and on contract. Homelessness for single women 65 + is growing as rents go far beyond the aged pension.

And people are still writing the stories for us – what we should look like; what our sexuality should be or whether the state should or shouldn't control women's fertility. We are battling social media telling our granddaughters they should look like porn stars or the Kardashians (which kind of the same thing) and as a result, they are surgically altering their bodies.

We need to teach the younger generation that ...

We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us.<sup>6</sup>

One foot in front of the other, we will pound this pavement into the future. It takes time to reach the promised land. The New Testament clearly teaches a priesthood of all believers. All believers are able to approach Jesus and all are able to represent him on earth. We have to rethink the stories we've been told and go back and read the texts and read more broadly. There are women theologians. Rarely are their texts in our seminaries.

Our calling has to be defiant hope. We must believe in the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. As resurrection people, we know that grace will come. I am so grateful for the women's stories in the Bible. We cannot be what we cannot see. Jesus had close friendships with women. He saw and heard them, taught and learned from them and because it was in HIS words, later scribes could not eliminate these encounters despite editors and translators and popes. I cling to Jesus' instructions to the Apostles:

<sup>37</sup> "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. <sup>38</sup> Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."<sup>7</sup>

Often the greatest change that takes place on a pilgrimage is in the way we rub against the people we journey with. Look around and see where the light is shining in the darkness. Name it<sup>8</sup>. Let us have eyes in our hearts to see unconscious bias, judgement, and the constructs that others try to put us in. We don't have to follow the paths that have been laid down for us. We can change course.

As we turn towards Jerusalem, let this trip change ALL of us.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:37-38

<sup>8</sup> My wonderful male colleagues in Ministry have been spontaneously posting their favourite prayers written by women theologians they admire. That's UCA!