

“Many women were also there...” (Matthew 27:55)

It may seem as though women have been airbrushed out of the events of Holy Week, but it is only a perception. Jesus’ female companions were integral to the unfolding drama, as the Gospel writers testify. Constant, unafraid and true, they are often presented in a more favourable light than their male counterparts.

Whereas the mob of Jerusalem shouted “Crucify, him!” the daughters of Jerusalem “were beating their breasts and wailing for him” (Luke 23:21, 27) along the road to Calvary. Jesus’ male disciples had mostly fled, but the women who accompanied him from Galilee “stood ... watching” the Crucifixion. Then, tailing the burial party, “They saw the tomb and how the body was laid” (Luke 23:49, 55) Matthew adds that when the stone was rolled across, they “were there, sitting opposite the tomb” (Matthew 27:61).

Pilate’s wife had attempted to intervene in the judicial proceedings: “Have nothing to do with that innocent man” (Matt 27:19) she told her brutal husband. Origen, writing in the third century, believed her to be a secret disciple¹; the Orthodox Church canonised her². Like Pilate, Herod Antipas had treated Jesus with contempt, yet at least one of his courtiers remained a devoted, if little known, follower. Luke identifies her as Joanna, wife of Chuza who ran the king’s household (Luke 8:2-3). We have no record of Jesus visiting Tiberias, so Joanna presumably went looking for him. She may have caught up with him in the nearby port of Magdala, since later accounts associate her with Mary of that town. Joanna was healed by Jesus and thereafter travelled with him, personally funding his ministry. Later she accompanied Mary of Magdala to anoint his body. Joanna was with her when, “Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground... it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James...” (Luke 24:4, 10).

The last of this group is intriguing. She is thought to be Mary wife of Clopas or Cleophas (Greek: Alphaeus) mentioned in John 19:25. According to early sources, Clopas was Joseph’s brother³, making her Jesus’ aunt by marriage. She stayed with Our Lady, her sister-in-law, at the foot of the cross, and returned to the tomb to anoint her nephew’s body. With them was Salome, wife of Zebedee (Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:56), to whom John 19:25 was possibly referring as the sister of Jesus’ mother. She, too, kept vigil at the cross. The two disciples called James appear to have fled, but their mothers, Jesus’ aunts, were not to be moved.

I am struck by the fearlessness and fidelity of these women. By associating with the ‘criminal’ of Nazareth, they were putting their respectability, even their safety, at risk. My own discipleship has been less costly. Only at one stage of my life as a Sister of Mercy have I experienced opprobrium.

¹ Origen, *Homilies on Matthew*

² St. Claudia Procula

³ Hegesippus, quoted in Eusebius’ *Church History*

It was while I was working in prison chaplaincy. My duties included daily visits to Catholic inmates admitted to the local hospital. Ordinary patients were understandably nervous to find a convicted man in an adjacent bed. They brooded about the nature of his crimes and resented every kindness shown him.

To enter the all-male ward was to run the gauntlet of their uncomprehending stares. There were prison officers sitting, bored, on each side of the hospital bed. Some might be friendly; others barely concealed their scorn. If the prisoner wished to receive Holy Communion, I would close the curtain round the bed, lifting it over the chains between his handcuffs and theirs. Then, spreading out the corporal on the counterpane, I would read the day's Gospel in a lowered voice, acutely sensitive to the sneering and pity of public gaze. I therefore came to share something of his vulnerability and exposure. It was, perhaps, as Jesus experienced it.

As I held out the Body of Christ, the prisoner would stretch out handcuffed hands to receive. Sometimes the chain, tautened, momentarily pulled up the curtain. There sat the lounging officers with their newspapers... they may as well have been throwing dice.

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