

Listening to the Voices

Donald Senior C.P.

(published in *The Bible Today* 28 [1990] 358-363)

The act of listening to the voices of those who may be pushed to the margins in the community of faith is not a modern invention but an instinct blessed by the Gospels themselves. In the dramatic arena of the Gospel narratives, the voices of the marginalized play a striking and instructive role. And in the Gospels, as in the Church and society today, many of those in the margins are women.

If we take a step back and view each of the Gospels as a whole, it is clear that the evangelist's portrayal of Christian life is reflected in the major characters and dramatic events of the Gospel narrative. Jesus, of course, in his person, his actions, and his teaching, proclaims the good news of God. His death and resurrection are the foundation of Christian life. The disciples, in both their weaknesses and allegiance, illustrate the challenge of following Jesus. The implacable enemies of Jesus become a negative lesson on what failure to respond to the Gospel looks like and how the Christian message is a prophetic challenge that will always brook resistance.

But weaving throughout the Gospel events are minor characters of the *dramatis personae*, whose roles are, nevertheless, highly significant. They vary in type, origin, and social status: women (Pilate's wife; the woman who anoints Jesus; Simon's mother-in-law) and men (Bartimaeus; Simeon; the repentant thief); Gentiles (the centurion of Capernaum; the guard at the cross; the Gadarene demoniac) as well as Jews; rich (Joseph of Arimathea) and poor (the widow who gives two coins); sometimes named (Martha) but often anonymous. Almost all of them have but a single brief scene in the Gospel drama. But most of them come from groups on the periphery and yet serve a very important purpose: their words or actions speak the truth with a singular force that often eclipses that of the other major characters who respond to Jesus.

Gospel Voices

Space permits only a few examples to illustrate the function of marginal voices in the Gospels. In view of the recent discussion about the role of women in the Church, I will concentrate on the examples of three anonymous women found in the Synoptic Gospels.

1) The Widow Who Gives Everything (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4). This provocative story, found in Mark and Luke's Gospels, is a perfect illustration of how powerful a role minor characters can play in the Gospel message. In this instance the woman is anonymous and does not even speak. Jesus and his disciples sit in the temple precincts and catch the people moving past the treasury, putting in their donations. The rich contribute large sums. The widow, however, has only two copper coins to give.

Jesus seizes the moment, calling his disciples together and reflecting on what the widow had done: "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12:43-44).

The wider context of this story in Mark's Gospel and the language employed by the evangelist demonstrate that Jesus' words are much more than a lesson in generosity. In the immediately preceding scene, Jesus had excoriated the religious leaders "who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38-40). The example of the widow stands in sharpest contrast to this brand of false religion exhibited by the leaders. Their religious posturing is condemnable; her

consummate act of generosity points to what true religion means.

And the description of the cost of her donation—literally her “whole life”—also underscores the significance of the widow’s action. She gives everything to God. This is the core experience of discipleship, as Jesus had repeatedly instructed his disciples on the road to Jerusalem. “For whoever would save their lives will lose them, and whoever loses their life for my sake and the Gospels will save it. For what does it profit someone to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mark 8:35-36). Jesus himself embodies the self-transcendence and commitment that the widow’s instinctive generosity reflects. It is not an accident that in Mark’s Gospel, the story of the widow takes place just as the drama of the Passion is about to begin.

2) The Woman Who Anoints Jesus for Death (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13). Another eloquent but silent and anonymous voice is heard in the Passion narratives of Mark and Matthew. As the dark clouds of the Passion gather, Jesus goes to the house of Simon the leper in Bethany, right outside of Jerusalem. While at table, a woman enters the room, breaks open an alabaster flask of expensive ointment, and anoints Jesus’ head with the fragrant oil.

The protests of Jesus’ companions (Matthew explicitly identifies them as “the disciples”) are immediate and hostile: “Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor” (Mark 14:5).

The disciples berate the woman but they have badly miscalculated. Jesus understands what the woman is doing and graciously accepts her lavish and intimate devotion. “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me” (Mark 14:6). In fact, with her instincts tuned to Jesus’ mood and the onrushing events of the Passion, the woman anoints Jesus for burial. But she also anoints him on his head—in the manner of anointing a king. She reveres Jesus and does “a beautiful thing” to him because she understands who he is and what is his destiny.

Once again the wider context of the Gospel puts this exquisite gesture into bold tones. The woman has perceived what most of the disciples in Mark fail to grasp—that Jesus must give his life for the many. In their dullness and fear, the Markan disciples are unprepared for the crisis of the Passion and will flee when violence and conflict erupt in the garden (see Mark 14:50). Immediately after the anointing at Bethany, Judas, one of the Twelve, goes to the leaders to betray his master (14:10-11). Surrounded by examples of incomprehension and treachery, only this anonymous woman offers Jesus the love and fidelity expected of a disciple. For that reason she receives an endorsement from Jesus unparalleled in the New Testament: “And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:9).

3) The Canaanite Woman Who Changes Jesus’ Mission (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Not all of the minor characters of the Gospel are silent. The story of the Canaanite woman is a parade example. The incident is found in Mark’s Gospel as Jesus’ encounter with a “Syro-Phoenician woman,” but in Matthew’s somewhat amplified version, the power of the story reaches its full force.

After a sharp exchange with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus and his disciples go to the district of Tyre and Sidon (present-day Lebanon), one of the few times in the Gospel that Jesus enters Gentile territory. He is confronted by a “Canaanite” woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter, who is severely tormented by a demon.

There now begins one of the most amazing encounters in all of the Gospels. The woman’s entreaties on behalf of her daughter are repeatedly rejected by Jesus. Four times she will press her case, with mounting urgency and determination. Three times Jesus will rebuff her, succumbing only when the determination of this parent on behalf of her ill daughter breaks through Jesus’ resistance.

The story is filled with drama. The woman’s first entreaty is met with silence: “He did not answer her a word.” But her persistence is too much for the disciples, who come to Jesus and beg him to send her

away, “for she is crying after us.” To them, Jesus evokes the God-given limits of his mission: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But the woman is not to be turned away by theological principles. She comes and kneels directly in front of Jesus, casting aside her dignity to plead with him: “Lord, help me.”

The force of that direct appeal disarms Jesus’ silence but does not yet change his theology: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But the woman will not be deterred by such statements, even if they seem to disenfranchise a Canaanite: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” At last, her persistent faith breaks through the theological boundaries of Jesus’ mission: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”

Few Gospel stories can match the boldness of this one or illustrate more vividly the endorsement given to voices on the margin. Once again the wider context of the Gospel throws the significance of the story into sharp relief. Jesus’ statement that his mission is “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” recalls a similar perspective found in the mission discourse of chapter 10, where the apostles are instructed to “go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6). Matthew’s Gospel is very much aware of the historical role of Israel as God’s people, and makes clear that in the flow of sacred history, the Gentile mission emerged out of the mission to Israel. Whether Gentiles could become Christians without first adopting the religious traditions and practices of Judaism, was a burning issue of the early Church.

Undoubtedly, Matthew’s own mixed community of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians must have known considerable tension over such issues. Matthew sympathetically presents a Jesus who is thoroughly Jewish and who respects the God-given role of Israel as the chosen people. But Matthew also shows Jesus affected by the faith and experience of Gentiles and ultimately open to them. Besides the Canaanite woman, there are other minor characters in his Gospel, such as the magi, the centurion of Capernaum, the Gadarene demoniac, and Pilate’s wife—all Gentiles who prove responsive to Jesus, sometimes with a faith far more daring than the disciples themselves.

This is surely the case with the Canaanite woman. Her fierce love of her daughter and her persistent trust that Jesus would ultimately help her leads to a change of perspective in Jesus himself. After encountering the Canaanite woman, he can no longer truly say that his mission is only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!” Precisely Matthew’s point to his own Church. The opening to the Gentile mission did not come simply through theological speculation, but by the Church’s finally absorbing what to many early Christians was the unanticipated authentic faith-experience of persons like the Canaanite Woman.

Listening to the Voices: A Gospel Principle

The list of such examples could go on, but perhaps these are sufficient to make the point. In each case the actions or words of a marginal character (and a woman) find their way to the centre of focus, over the protests of those who seem to stand in the centre. What they do and what they have to say reveal a depth of faith and commitment that challenges the perspectives of the disciples, or in the case of the Canaanite woman, even Jesus himself.

The first-century Church was not in a position to pose the issues of gender and role in the same manner we do today. But the biblical tradition did prepare them for a principle of action that modern Christians would do well to retain. The important role given to the “minor characters” of the Gospels, and the fact that they often prove to be more genuine and more faithful in their discipleship than the major players, are in harmony with a deeper theological instinct of the Bible as a whole. Israel itself was born from a people who were voiceless and marginalized as slaves in Egypt. The Bible presents the God of Israel as one who listens to the cries of the poor and liberates them; such an affirmation is not a contemporary trend, but a first principle of the biblical epic.

Jesus, as the prophets before him, embodies that principle; himself born of a marginal family and drawing many of his followers from the periphery. His opponents unwittingly catch this truth in branding him a “glutton and a drunkard, a love, of tax collectors and those outside the law” (Matt 11:19). Jesus’ beatitudes declare blessed the poor, the meek, and those who suffer injustice. Jesus’ healing touch reached out to the disabled and the isolated and opened the way for them to take their rightful place in the community.

In other words, the Jesus of the Gospels is one whose ear and eye and hand are turned toward the periphery, listening intently, watching carefully, reaching out, drawing in. The biblical examples we have considered do not in themselves “solve” the issues and problems of today. But they do confirm that by listening to the experience of women, so often marginalized in many sectors of the Church and society, and working to open the way for their rightful role in the Church, Christian leaders would be in tune with a fundamental motif of the Gospels.

Father Donald Senior c.p. is *professor of New Testament studies and the president of Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. He acquired his doctoral degree from the University of Louvain in Belgium. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the New Testament.*