

WOMEN AS JESUS' DISCIPLES

Women followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, and did not abandon him at the moment of his execution. They heard his message, learned from him, and followed him close at hand, just as male disciples did. This is an indisputable fact confirmed in all the Christian sources, although some Gospel writers, like Luke, play down their presence. This is something very surprising, since in the decade of the thirties and even later, women were not allowed to study law with a rabbi. Moreover, to follow a man around the countryside and sleep outdoors with a group of men was probably scandalous. The spectacle of a group of women, sometimes without their husbands, following a celibate man who accepts them into his circle along with his male disciples, could only inspire resentment.

These women were part of the group following Jesus from the beginning. Some of them probably followed him along with their husbands, others were single women. The Gospels did not say that Jesus called them individually. They probably came to him, attracted by his person, but they would not have dared to stay with him if Jesus had not invited them. He never excludes or separates them for reasons of gender or impurity. They are 'sisters' who belong to the new family Jesus is creating, and they are respected along with the 'brothers'. Jesus, the prophet of God's reign, only speaks of one discipleship, of equals.

We know a few of their names. Mary of Magdala holds a pre-eminent place, as Peter does among the men. She, with Mary the mother of James the younger and Salome is in a group of three who are apparently closest to Jesus; just as among the men, Peter, James and John enjoy the position of special friendship. Martha and Mary were also special friends of Jesus with whom he stayed whenever he went up to Jerusalem but do not appear to have accompanied him on his travels. The women who followed Jesus to Jerusalem were prominent in the last days of his life. There is little doubt that they shared in the last supper. How could they be absent from this farewell meal when they usually helped prepare, serve and eat meals with Jesus. Moreover a Passover meal was one of the feasts that Jewish women did attend. Also after the crucifixion when the disciples met in the same house where the dinner was held, the women were present.

The male and female disciples reacted differently to the execution of Jesus. While the men fled, the women remained faithful. Although the Romans would not allow any interference with their criminal work, the women were "looking on from a distance" and later saw where he was buried. But what is most important is the part they played in the origin of the resurrection faith. Women are identified with the first report of Jesus' resurrection. Two traditions circulated in the Christian community, one attributes the first experience to Mary of Magdala while the other gives primacy to Peter. If Mary was the first in the group of women and Peter among the men, it is probably because an important role was attributed to both in the origin of faith in the risen Jesus.

The women's presence as disciples is not secondary or marginal. On the contrary, in many ways they are a model of true discipleship. They did not debate who was to be the greatest in the Kingdom, they were used to being last and used to 'serving'. They probably did do most of the serving and the other chores but we should not see this service as their task in a logical distribution of work within the group. For Jesus, it was a model for the activity of every disciple (Luke 22:27) Perhaps at some point Jesus joined the women in serving, thus showing everyone the proper activity for their life as disciples. Women's activity was a model of discipleship for men because of their commitment, their attitude to service, and their faithfulness to Jesus to the end, without betraying or abandoning him.

These women were never called 'disciples' because in both Aramaic and Greek the word is always a masculine noun. The phenomenon of women integrated in the group of Jesus' disciples was so new that there were no adequate words to express it. They are not called disciples, but Jesus sees and treats them as such. They are not among 'the Twelve' chosen by Jesus to recall the restoration of Israel. That symbolic number represents the Jewish people formed by twelve tribes descended from the twelve male sons of Jacob.

From Jesus, Jose A Pagola, Convivium Press