

1 THIRSTY

One of my earliest memories is of re-enacting the adventures of Marine Boy – the first Japanese Manga to be shown on British television. I was not more than three but knew that the ‘best’ character was Marine Boy and not Neptina, his friend the mermaid. I had no interest in the girl’s part. Growing up in the 1970s, I thought that it was rubbish to be a girl. I was unaware of the women’s liberation movement exploding around me; instead, I was dealing with my own frustrations. One was the separation of the sexes at playtime in my primary school. I was banished to a world of girls playing ‘horses’, skipping and doing handstands except I didn’t know their skipping games and never mastered the art of the handstand. My pockets were full of conkers and marbles and no one to play them with. As the youngest with three older brothers, I learnt to fight my corner, I proudly called myself a tomboy and looked down on ‘girly’ girls. Out of school, my friends were all boys, we clambered over seaside rocks, rode our bikes, made dens and caught crabs. I found girls more difficult; they

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were always falling out and not talking to each other. Boys could be troublesome too: I broke my collarbone being made to walk the plank while playing pirates. I was frequently tied up as a prisoner in the shed and was always on the losing end of fights with my brothers, but that aside, I loved them. Before adolescence kicked in, I definitely wanted to be a boy.

Church did not help in this. The women all wore terrible clothes, Sunday best complete with hats and gloves – yes I am really that old! My mother, who had longed for a girl after three boys, dressed me up in Crimplene frocks with knee-high white socks and buckle shoes that I hated. I was so grateful when she finally made me a 1970s trouser suit that was considered smart enough for church. But my biggest hate was reserved for the Girls' Brigade. Their uniform was a red polo neck top under a navy pinafore dress, white tights and polished black shoes. We were crowned with a flat hat held on by elastic under our chins. Once a month it was parade Sunday and once a month I had to wear this attire to church. This was not the worst part. My brothers, as members of the Boys' Brigade, were all encouraged to play in a brass band. They each chose an instrument, a trumpet, a bugle and drums and led the parade around the town while we walked behind them. We girls did nothing but follow; there were no instruments for us. This was the ultimate humiliation.

I grew up and discovered that life throws much tougher obstacles at people. I began to enjoy being a woman, although I struggled to shake off the sense that somehow I was an imposter and not appropriately feminine or skilled in things that mattered, like cooking. My sense of womanhood was

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negative. I saw women as less important than men, even though I was living at the time of Britain's first female prime minister. Where did my negativity come from? Was it the church, or was it the general culture of 1970s Margate? I grew up in the church, and the church I attended had no female role models to aspire to. My secondary school was a Girls' Grammar School, but it did not help us with our aspirations, and we were directed to be secretaries, nurses or mothers. I had one history teacher whose ultimate exasperated criticism was, 'You are the sort of girl who drinks out of a mug!' Drinking from mugs being the norm at home, I never understood why they were a problem. I did learn that being a girl meant pleasing men and being quiet. It does not take long for this attitude to lead you to believe your significance comes from being in a relationship with a man.

Why tell you this? The world I have described disappeared in English culture during the 1980s. In 1947 a Gallup survey among women found in answer to the question: 'would you rather be male or female?' that only 56 per cent of women chose female. Today in response to the same question, a resounding 86 per cent prefer to be female.¹ Things have changed. Girls today grow up with fantastic role models. The world of fantasy fiction has provided us with Hermione Granger, Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior. The *Star Wars* franchise has given us Rey, a heroine who wields the lightsaber herself. Schools encourage girls to take education very seriously, and girls outperform boys at GCSE and A-Level. More young

1 'Most women in 2016 happy to be female, BBC poll suggests' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37600771> accessed July 2017

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women go to university than men, and they outnumber men studying medicine and law. They are even beginning to break into engineering.

I grew up believing that, as a woman, I was second class while young women today grow up being told they have great potential. However, despite this, many find life is a lot more unsatisfying than they hoped and the world a more threatening and abusive place than they had been told. Others face broken relationships and struggle from the start. Modern life is a struggle. We have been told that we can be anything, but fear that we aren't enough in anything at all. We are aware of our inadequacies, our failings, and our inability to be what we dream of being. We feel the pressure to conform, to achieve, to be beautiful, to be capable, to be self-sufficient, to multitask, to have it all and do it all. We have been busy trying to gain respect and equality but are left gasping for something and not even sure what it is we need. Despite all our accomplishments, deep down, we know we need more. All of us in our darkest moments wonder what it means to be truly loved, really valued, and completely satisfied.

Scriptwriter Phoebe Waller-Bridge expressed a lot of people's fears through one of her characters:

I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning.....every morning, what to eat...what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in. Who to vote for, who to love, and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to

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*live my life because so far I think I have been getting it wrong..
I'm still scared. Why am I still scared?²*

Waller-Bridge's character in her exhausted pain longed for someone to take over. C.S. Lewis diagnosed this pain as our need to have a relationship with our creator:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.³

But can it possibly be true that it is by knowing God that we can discover what it is to be truly loved? Can it be that by understanding the value God places on us we find out our true worth? Modern women are left with a dilemma, if the church has failed to love, value and respect women in the past, how can it be possible that Christianity has any answers to our deepest fears? We need to stop looking at the flawed institution of the church and start by looking at its great founder, the man Jesus Christ. How did Jesus view women, and what did He offer them?

Jesus' Encounters with Women

Women's status in the ancient world was low. The Athenian woman was unable to go into the public sphere without being accompanied by a trustworthy male escort; she was not permitted to eat with her husband's male guests, she was not given a voice, not allowed to engage in public discourse,

2 *Fleabag* season 2 broadcast on BBC in 2019

3 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952), (Fount Paperbacks, 1984), p. 118

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and not given access to education. It is no wonder that Euripides gave these famous words to Medea in his play of the same name: ‘Surely, of all creatures that have life and wit, we women are of all unhappiest.’⁴ Roman women had a little more freedom than their Greek counterparts, but their status was extremely low. Baby girls were considered disposable, and there were high rates of female infanticide. The early church was committed to the value of every life, and their rescue of these baby girls is well documented.⁵

At the time of Jesus’ life and ministry Hebrew culture had many similarities in its attitude towards women, ‘they were defined as socially, intellectually and spiritually inferior’. Jesus came into a culture that was at best respectful of the women in their family contexts but at worst, deeply misogynistic. Women had little influence, and they were not spoken to in public settings. The rabbinic oral law included this: ‘Let the words of the Law be burned rather than taught to women...If a man teaches his daughter the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery.’⁶

Jesus came as God Himself, the one who gave life to the world, the one who had spoken everything into existence. He came to expose the darkness of that world and reveal the light. He confronted wrong understandings and challenged the leading theologians of His day. He accused them of ‘setting aside the commands of God and holding on to human

4 *Medea*, 231-32, in Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity changed the world* (Zondervan, 2014), pp. 98-99

5 *ibid.* p. 53

6 *ibid.* pp.103-104

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traditions.⁷ When He burst on the scene, it caused such upset that it wasn't long before the Jewish leaders were plotting to kill Him.⁸ His teaching and behaviour was radical, not least in how He related to women. He didn't exclude women from theological discussions, in fact, He engaged with women on some of the most important issues of the day. When He met a Samaritan woman in a place called Sychar, He broke every social taboo in the book.⁹ Talking to her was radical in and of itself, but she was a despised foreigner with a very dubious moral background. His disciples were shocked to find Him speaking with a woman. If they had known the contents of the conversation, they would have been speechless. Jesus discussed the complex theological divisions between the Jews and the Samaritans and revealed to this woman the nature of true worship. But He did not just engage in an intellectually demanding conversation; His passionate concern was to offer this woman what He called 'the water of life'. He did not want her to be spiritually thirsty but to have a relationship with God the Father which would completely satisfy, unlike any other relationship she had experienced. He wanted to give her 'living water' which would lead to eternal life. It was an incredible conversation which culminated in Jesus telling her that He was the promised King that both the Jews and the Samaritans were waiting for. He revealed Himself as the promised Messiah to one of the most socially and politically insignificant people of His time. This woman mattered, she

7 Mark 7:9

8 Mark 3:6

9 John 4:4-30

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mattered a lot. Jesus showed time again that women were important to Him. He taught them, they were numbered among His followers, and amazingly, when He rose from the dead He appeared first to a woman.

You might wonder how come women were generally so disregarded in Jesus' day. How had it got to this point? Some think the justification for women being viewed as less valuable comes straight from the pages of the Jewish Scriptures – the book we commonly refer to as the Old Testament. However, Jesus Himself upheld these Scriptures. He was adamant that He had come not to overturn them but to fulfil them.¹⁰ If the Old Testament is a sexist text that leads to patriarchy and misogyny, it is strange that Jesus spoke so highly of it. It could be that Jesus was inconsistent, but that would be a problem too. If we are to trust Jesus, who offered the unnamed Samaritan woman life, we need to know that He is not inconsistent. We need to look at the book Jesus upheld. We need to find out if the Old Testament is to blame for a deep-seated hatred towards women. It stands accused of being a book that has been used to establish male power and confine women.

It is difficult to conclude that the Jesus we meet in the gospels supported teaching that was derogatory towards women, so could it be that the misogyny that we fear is in its pages is not there? Could it be that it is the traditions of men, not the Word of God, that is the heart of the problem? The rest of this book will explore what God's attitude to women is from the Old Testament, a book which many of us find alien

¹⁰ Matthew 5:17

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and unsettling. Come with me on a journey back to where everything started.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND CONVERSATION

- In the last 100 years activists have achieved a lot. What issues do you think women still need to deal with today?
- What do you think is essential in life in order for us to be fulfilled?

READ JOHN 4:1 -42

- What is Jesus offering the woman at the well?
- How does she respond to Him?
- What do you make of what Jesus offers?