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**Women who meet God**  
*Thinking over the strengths and weaknesses  
that need to change the world*

Today I would like to share with you some stories in the Bible which concern women so that together we may reflect on the way which women, who meet God, can become instruments of hope and action in the service of life, dignity and the common good. I could have presented a theological synthesis and treated this theme more theoretically, in a complete and exhaustive way, examining the many aspects which we can think of and using philosophical and sociological arguments.

However, instead, I preferred to choose stories, episodes, personal experiences and biographies. In fact, I think, that the first thing that our faith keeps telling us is to keep in mind that there is no "general theory" about pain, joy, life or violated dignity. Every pain or violence, every joy or hope is always a story which is dramatically personal. Behind a «problem» there are always persons, stories, mothers, brothers, sons and daughters, friends, days and lives. Specially in cases of violence on vulnerable people, on women and children, violence always leaves a scar on the victim and on those close to the victim, on the culprit and on those who keep quiet and do nothing to stop it. I would like to share some stories with you, starting with stories from the Bible. These will help us to focus on our present-day experiences and on the people we come across, through our faith which will also spur us to listen with an open heart to the silent cry of the women and children, of the elderly and lonely people, of the poor and of all those whose voice is rarely listened to. Listening to these voices, we will find the strength and the grace to take some kind of action.

In the Bible, there is room for all our life: the Bible does not turn a blind eye and God knows what stuff we are made of. Once, I was reading the Bible with a group of women who were living in a shelter for women victims of violence. We were reading a text which was so tough and violent that I did not know how to justify it. One of them said: «So, in this Bible there is room even for me and for my story; it does not speak only about happy women». So, I will try to look at the Bible in a way so that it may help us to find a place for each and everyone and for all things which concern all women and men.

I have chosen stories and figures who are not so well-known: surely, we have had and will still have a chance to «meet» great figures in the Bible, first among these Mary, the mother of Jesus. But this could be the first step in our conversion – to listen to «minor figures », to those who led a hidden life and are just mentioned in history, but who, having met God, did all within their power for the good of all. Each one of us is a «minor figure» but none of us is so insignificant that he/she cannot do something.

### **1. Starting way back: Siphrah and Puah**

We read in the Book of *Exodus* Chapter 1: <sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shiphrah and the other Puah: <sup>16</sup>«When you attend Hebrew women in childbirth, look well at the two stones. If it is a boy, kill him; if a girl, let her live». <sup>17</sup>But the midwives were God-fearing women and did not obey the orders of the king of Egypt, but allowed the boys to live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them: «What do you mean by allowing the boys to live?» <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh: «Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are hardy and give birth before the midwife can get to them. <sup>20</sup>For this, God was good to the midwives, and the people went

on increasing and growing more powerful; <sup>21</sup>and since the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own».

Two women, whose job puts them on the threshold of life to guard it and who are called to assist in the birth of other people's children, clash with the power of the new king «who had never heard of Joseph» (Ex 1,8). Male projects and power: Joseph, who was known and esteemed, was a protection for the people of Israel, the new pharaoh was a death threat for the very survival of the people.

But two women, of whom the text only gives the name and the job (Siphrah and Puah, midwives), are the little grain of sand which blocks the mechanism and which makes it possible for Moses to survive at birth and in spite of all difficulties become the guide of his people to the promised land. And why do they do this? The text tells us that «they feared God», they know that there is an authority which is greater than Pharaoh's and Joseph's, and they act according to their own consciousness of this «fear». As we know, in the Bible, the fear of God does not mean being afraid of God, but rather having a profound sense that there are things in life and in our lives which are too important to fall under anybody's power or whim.

The midwives of Israel show us that we should be far-sighted and should start from the dignity of our own conscience, from having a profound sense of that which counts and that which counts less, of that which lasts and that which is destined to pass, of that which we should follow. In the Old Testament, the fear of God means the profound sense of the seriousness of our existence which can and should unite us all. With all simplicity but also very cleverly, Siphrah and Puah, when answering (with a bit of cunning) 'Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are hardy and quick in giving birth, it is not our fault...,' just did their job. The logic of their job was to help in giving birth and not to kill.

To fear God, whom we want to meet and help others to meet, we should start to educate ourselves from here: being where we are and doing that for which we are responsible, with the expected thoroughness.

## **2. Setting out on a journey: the servant of Namaan's wife**

In the *Book of Kings* Chapter 5 we can read: <sup>1</sup>Naaman, army commander to the kings of Aram, was a man who enjoyed his master's respect and favour, since through him Yahweh had granted victory to the Aramaeans. <sup>2</sup> But the man suffered from leprosy. Now, on one of their raids into Israelite territory, the Aramaeans had carried off a little girl, who became a servant of Namaan's wife. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, «If only my master would approach the prophet of Samaria! He would cure him of his skin-disease »".

A girl, whose name we do not even know and whose life was not so easy had ended up as a slave. The Bible does not speak about her plight, about those she left behind and the pain of her separation... but says something which is more important. The girl did not choose the way of revenge nor did she become indifferent towards life and to the problems of her masters. She let herself be touched by the pain endured by the brave and esteemed man struck by leprosy. Leprosy is a good metaphor for that which divides and excludes. Leprosy wipes out all that which used to be: merits, honour, esteem: a leper becomes a man of whom people are afraid and from whom they keep away.

And so the girl takes the initiative. She shares her precious richness even at the time of her imprisonment and slavery: her trust in the prophet Elisha who cures in the land of Samaria. She is an insignificant woman who strongly believes that life and benediction are possible and that one does not have to resign oneself to leprosy. Even those who are far from being one's friends and benefactors or worse who did her harm, deserve to have hope and the possibility of being cured.

In the *Gospel* according to *Luke*, Chapter 4, we find <sup>27</sup>"There were many suffering from leprosy in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha: but none of these was cured – only Namaan, the Syrian", a phrase attributed to Jesus who was provoked by his fellow countrymen after he had preached in the synagogue in Nazareth. And he shows us that the boundaries of faith and blessing and of meeting God are not geographical and are not easy to be identified.

Thus the girl, servant of Namaan's wife, anticipated us: there are no boundaries between friends and enemies, between those who are «mine» and the «others» when it is a question of compassion and healing. We need to have a heart, which is easily touched and moved so that others too may start moving along their own way. God, Father of all, knows how to lead each and every one towards his place of blessing.

### **3. Can women be violent also? Deborah and Jael**

There are episodes in the Bible which are not so nice and peaceful. If we read Chapters 4 and 5 in the *Book of Judges*, we come across two women, Deborah and Jael, whose behaviour upsets us. We are at the time of the Judges, precisely when the people of God is restless, uncertain, confused and without a leader («Ehud died, and the Israelites again began doing what is evil in Yahweh's eyes »(*Jg* 4,1)). Peril was awaiting them, the enemies were many and merciless; Deborah is a prophetess and judge in Israel and called Barak telling him to challenge his enemies' army in battle. He did so and won, but the head of his enemies, Sisera, fled on foot. Jael, a woman, about whom we know only that she was the wife of one of Sisera's allies, attracted Sisera to her tent and there, in a very cruel way, killed him and handed his dead body to Barak.

Up to here this is how the story goes. In Chapter 5, this is followed by a song of praise and joy sung by Deborah. Do women then plot to kill? Yes, but not their own personal enemies, but rather those who are a danger to the existence of the people of Israel. In her song, Deborah says: «<sup>7</sup>Gone was freedom beyond the walls, gone indeed from Israel, when I, Deborah, rose, when I rose a mother in Israel». Here we have the crux of the problem. In olden times, the only way to exercise power was through violence. Fortunately today, we know that there are other ways of exercising power and authority but the question remains the same: who is going to assume responsibility in time of crisis, who is going to take the role of a «mother», who knows how to listen to the Lord and to serve him by doing what is required even risking to make mistakes?

Deborah and Jael are examples of drastic actions, full of courage and able to keep their senses in difficult times. They do not wait for others to take decisions and do not pity themselves in gloomy situations. They listen to God's word and try to find the way and the people so that this word may be followed and becomes reality.

And also, we should note that there had to be two women to accomplish this task: one, on her own, even if strong, was not enough, but together they could carry it out. Also, together with men: Deborah

consults Barak, who, not casually, answers: «<sup>8</sup>If you come with me, I shall go; if you will not come, I shall not"».

What does assuming a great responsibility, which calls for our action, without choosing the only way of violence to carry it out, mean to us today? And what does carrying it out together mean?

#### 4. Without tiring of waiting: Anna

We read in the *Gospel* according to *Luke*, Chapter 2: «<sup>3</sup>There was a prophetess, too, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. She had lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old. She never left the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. <sup>38</sup>She came up just at that moment and began to praise God and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem».

With this text we have made a great leap forward, from the time of the Judges (around 1000 B.C.) to the time of Jesus, to be exact when the baby Jesus was presented in the Temple. The first meeting is with Simeon, but we are also told about the meeting with another prophetess (like Deborah) named Anna.

Times had changed, Israel had built up a kingdom, it had lost it, it had been purified by living in exile, it had returned to its land and suffered under foreign domination... The expectations grew along the centuries, and the desire to test God's faithfulness to his promise, even when everything indicated the contrary, persisted.

New types of responsibility had to be taken during this period of expectation: on the one hand the patient and faithful type of expectation («now she was eighty-four years old»), on the other hand speaking about the child out of the temple, to those who were waiting for the deliverance of Jerusalem. Simeon speaks for himself («Now Master you can let your servant go in peace») and for Mary («and a sword will pierce your soul»); Anna speaks to the many others without a name who are waiting, lays out nets of faithful expectation which finally and mysteriously acknowledge, in a helpless child, the mighty and powerful God and opens eyes and hearts.

In Anna we see the anticipation of that which Jesus was to accomplish: he dies, for our salvation, **and makes nobody die**. Thus, in the apparent weakness of the expectation and in the silence of a word which does not bear Simeon's authoritative solemnity but rather the mildness of «speaking somewhere else» Anna does not assume her responsibility forcefully. But what strength must she have had never to leave the temple and to serve God night and day! What violent self-control must she have exercised not to lose hope and not to give in to her old age: not to stop hoping that in the paradoxical sign of a new born there appeared God's victory over death and sin!

#### 5. The courage of a touch: the woman suffering from a hemorrhage

Again in the *Gospel* according to *Luke*, Chapter 8: «<sup>42</sup>As he went, the crowds almost crushed him. <sup>43</sup>And a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years, who had spent her whole livelihood on doctors and was unable to be cured by anyone, <sup>44</sup>came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak and immediately her bleeding stopped. <sup>45</sup>Jesus asked: «Who touched me?» While all were denying it, Peter said: «Master, the crowds are pushing and pressing in upon you ». <sup>46</sup>But Jesus said: «Someone has

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touched me; for I know that power has gone out of me». <sup>47</sup>When the woman realised that she had not escaped notice, she came forward trembling. Falling down before him, she explained in the presence of all the people, why she had touched him and she had been healed immediately. <sup>48</sup>He said to her: «Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace !»”

It is a text which is rather mysterious and is about a female figure (again without a name). Enwrapped in shame and helplessness due to her being a woman and worse still an impure one,... so conscious of her marginalised condition and so tried by her illness, she does not dare to speak, ask or wish. But she is not resigned or defeated: she approached from behind and unobtrusively/unpretentiously touches Jesus' cloak.

Women know how to find indirect, discreet and tactful ways: in Italian, the same word («tatto», in fact) means the gracefulness and the gentleness and also the sense of touch which helps us to assess things through our fingers, our hands and our body. Women know how to attain their end by using a round-about way, through gentle, courteous body language, knowing when a caress heals more effectively than a thousand words.

The woman in the Gospel needs healing and desires it desperately. She knows with all her body and her heart that Jesus can cure her. She is part of a noisy and pressing crowd so she picks up courage and finds a discreet way.

Jesus felt a «power» going out of him. It is an expression which indicates a bodily contact without words, which creates a profound communion, a link, a meeting. It is a meeting which transforms, which cures, which saves, which asks for strength and acquires it, which gives strength and regenerates it.

May we discover in us the strength which the Lord gives us and may we have the courage to let ourselves be overtaken by the salvation he gives us. In our turn, may we become attentive to the touch of those who are marginalised, those who do not even dare to speak and to ask, and those who need to be healed. With «tact» and through round-about and indirect ways let us find ways of sowing benediction all around us.

## **6. We continue: Lydia, Priscilla and the many others**

In the *Acts* and in the *Letters of Saint Paul* we find a reference to many women: for example in Chapter 16 we find <sup>14</sup>“There was also a woman called Lydia who had come to the meeting. She came from the town of Thyatira and was in the purple-dye trade and who revered God. The Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. <sup>15</sup>After she and her household had been baptised she kept urging us: «If you judge me a true believer in the Lord, come and stay with us». And she would take no refusal”; and in Chapter 18 <sup>1</sup>“After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup>Here he met a Jew called Aquila, whose family came from Pontus. He and his wife Priscilla had recently left Italy because an edict of Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome. Paul went to visit them, <sup>3</sup>and when he found they were tentmakers, of the same trade as himself, he lodged with them, and they worked together”.

Lydia, Priscilla and the many others are only the beginning of a multitude of women who, throughout the centuries and right up to this day, have followed the Lord. Some of these we know by name (Agnes, Scholastica, Chiara, Hildegard, Theresa, Edith...) and the church presents them to us as guides, models and friends. The greatest majority (the many others!) is not known by name and only God knows it.. But

definitely, each one of us cherishes in her heart her own grandmother, mother, catechist, a nun, a friend: there is a tradition of a faith which is shared, transmitted, taught and lived which continues. The Lord continues to open hearts so that His Word may convert them and may continue to give them the joy of meeting sisters, women, who have met God and who, because of this, are open to brothers and sisters.

It is striking, that in the apostolic texts, the most commonly mentioned characteristic (as in the two short quoted texts) is hospitality which, absolutely, «urges»! To be able to be part of the many others, one has to take the first step by being hospitable which means offering space in her own house and in her own heart for everyone, and truly for everyone. Concretely, hospitality stems from an attitude of the heart and of the mind and from the conviction that no one is a stranger and that I cannot be indifferent to anyone. Only if we believe this can we discover the ways, the action to be taken, the choices to be made and the necessary collaboration to change the world so as to orientate it towards the Kingdom of God.

### **7. So that all may bless God**

I would like to conclude this shared reflection with a short text, written by an evangelical sister. To me, this seems to express clearly the necessary realism and the hope in the Lord which we have and which we hope to keep having in order to serve life, dignity and the common good:

*"I have always read the Psalms casually. I say to myself: these are poems, prayers and words which originated from long ago experiences; if you want to understand the text, study and contextualize! And ye ... today, having been asked to speak about violence, about male violence on women, I could look up one of the many psalms which cry out to God in pain and defeat. But a different verse keeps coming to my mind: «My God, my king... Day after day I shall bless you, I shall bless your name for ever and ever». I look for it in the Bible: it is the beginning of the Psalm of Praise 145.*

*Everyday. Everyday I will praise the Lord, even when I know that there are beaten wives, children for sale, infibulated girls, adolescent prostitutes, raped elder people, creatures dying from bombings and hunger, living skeletons ...*

*What praise, Lord ?*

*The human condition is so heavily marked by injustices, robberies and abuse of power that it seems inevitable – where it is possible - to withdraw in our own nest, our own family and our own community or - on the contrary -to become judges, give vent to our frustration, foster hatred, seek vengeance and try to find the sacrificial lamb. Unfortunately, the story repeats itself.*

*What praise, Lord? It seems that we know only ritual words: true but ritual.*

*"Praise be to You Lord", says the psalmist. Maybe, the old verse is on our lips that are void of praise because we mayn know that, day after day, the Spirit, in His liberty, opens new horizons for those who invoke him. Every difficult day, in spite of all the discouragements and all the resistance, let us praise Your Name, Lord and keep moving on holding our heads high."*

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