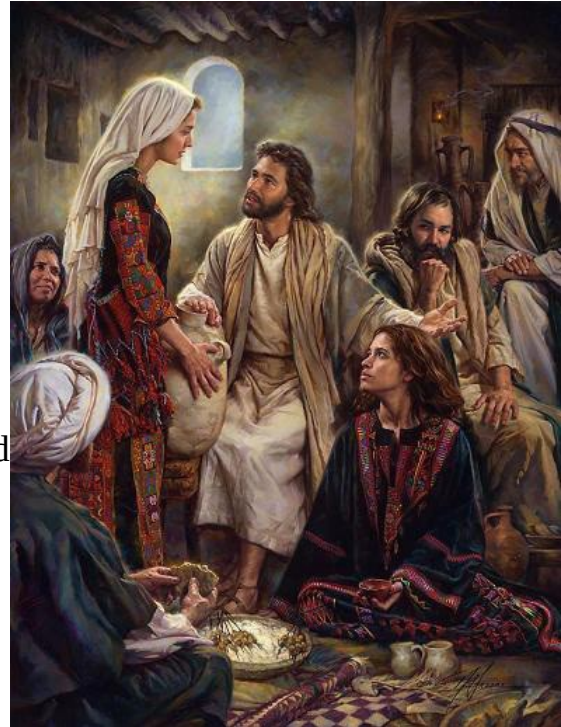


The Women who supported Jesus

I am not quite sure how I came to be travelling this road with these people. If you had told me even six months ago that I would give up my home, leave my husband and children, and travel with the friends and followers of an itinerant Rabbi, I would have laughed at you. But Rabbi Jesus came to our village. He sat at the well, and talked to the women gathered there. He went to the Synagogue and read from Torah and explained it to the men and women present. What he said made so much sense, that I knew that I had to hear more. My husband was not happy, but he understood me well enough to wish me well, and to hope that I will return to him, when I have got this out of my system.

I have got into the rhythm of the road now.

We move from village to village. In each place we stop, Rabbi Jesus will talk to anyone and everyone who will listen. As in my village it is usually at the village well or in the synagogue. Sometimes it is in the market place. Best of all it is in the homes of someone who invites him to come and rest and eat.



I suppose that we are a group of about thirty now, mostly men, with just a few women, wandering the countryside. I know that sometimes some of the men worry that the Roman authorities will round us all up and put us in prison, but so far all they have done is send the odd spy to sit and listen and report back. Most of them are really obvious. I suppose the good ones just blend in. The High Priest has just begun sending Pharisees and Sadducee from the Temple in Jerusalem to stir things up between Rabbi Jesus and his listeners, but Rabbi Jesus always has an answer for them, and they go away rather disgruntled.

I and the other women make sure that the men have places to stay and food to eat. Most of the time it is not really difficult. We Jews are a very hospitable people. I suppose that it comes from having been nomadic people ourselves. We are taught from children that the three things that define us as Jews are, Worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem, the study of Torah and Hospitality to those in need. We are taught from a child that if a stranger comes to the door asking for food and a bed, we should invite them in. As a family we will share with them water, to wash the journey from their hands and feet, an honoured place at our family meal, a space to sleep on the platform of our house, among members of the family, and a meal in the morning before they leave on their travels again.

On these last few months, I have spoken with many different people of different nations who have found themselves sitting briefly at the feet of the Rabbi as he teaches. I have been astonished to discover that this duty of hospitality is not universal. In the synagogue we are taught that everything that we have belongs to Yahweh, and when we give hospitality or alms to the poor, we are only giving from what Yahweh has given us. It is a command, a 'Mitzvah' that we give alms and feed the poor. I have always tried to give as I should. When the poor come to the door, I would invite them in, and give of what we had, but when you are in the middle of cleaning or cooking or the myriad of other chores you must do, I found myself quite resentful at times. Now I deeply regret that resentment and am so grateful for those who feed me now. If it is still early in the day when I go looking for places for the group to stay, I will help grind the flour or mix the bread, anything to help relieve the burden I feel myself to be.

Now that I am the one receiving hospitality, there is a different expectation on me. As a guest we must bless our host when we leave, and we should pronounce the grace at the meal we eat using the words:

"May it be the will of God that the master of this house shall not be ashamed in this world, nor abashed in the world to come; that he shall be successful in all his undertakings; and that his property (and our property) shall prosper and be near the city; and that Satan shall have no dominion over his handiwork (and over our handiwork); and that no sinful act or iniquitous thought shall occur to him (and to us) from now even to all eternity."

Given that not everyone feels comfortable with giving hospitality, the Rabbis have rules we should all follow, which are really only common sense or politeness. Hospitality should be given willingly, and the host should not make us feel uncomfortable while we are eating, or make it seem as if he resents us being there eating his food. I know, as a host, particularly in times when food is scarce that it is very difficult not to feel resentful at a complete stranger, a 'ger' eating the food you have prepared for your own children. I know that it is also difficult when, as custom demands, the stranger leaves some food on the side of his plate to show that he has eaten enough, and you then have to beg him to finish what is there.

Rabbi Jesus uses stories about all sorts of ordinary things to tell us about what Yahweh is like. He sometimes uses our having to find hospitality for the night to retell the stories behind the way in which we give hospitality. He tells of when our forefather Abraham saw the strangers approach him from the desert. He rushed out to meet them, and bring them to his tent, where he gave them food and water. What he only found out later was that the strangers were angels from Yahweh, and in giving them hospitality, Abraham brought many blessings upon himself, and on us his descendants. There are some stories about hospitality which our village Rabbi used to tell us, that I really don't like, particularly the one where Lot and the old man of Gibeah give their daughters to save the strangers in their house. Lot's daughters were lucky, Yahweh saved them, but the daughter and concubine of the old man of Gibeah

weren't so lucky. The daughter was raped, and the concubine raped and killed, all so that the man could save a stranger. That is how hospitable we must be to please Yahweh.

Rabbi Jesus is very clear that we will not abuse the laws of hospitality, and we will not stay longer than one night in a village, unless we are pressed to do so. He knows as well as anyone the strain that we can put on a community. Regularly sponging off people is heartily condemned, but as a travelling Rabbi, Jesus is made most welcome, and talks and shares stories in exchange for his food and bed.

Rabbi Jesus has been on the road for nearly three years now, and there are rumours among members of the group that he is now heading toward Jerusalem. Finding places to stay for us in Jerusalem is easier as the Rabbi has many friends and followers there, who will willingly put us up. The houses of the wealthy, where there are places set for the stranger at the gate have a flag flying at the door when the meal is ready, and you know you have missed the food, as the flag comes down when the meal is finished.

I have sat at Rabbi Jesus feet for many hours now, and have heard his stories many times. I am always filled with wonder when he interprets a bit of the law with a story or a saying. I like 'Blessed are the poor in heart, for they shall see God'. I don't know whether I am poor or rich at the moment. I live from day to day, and I pray that each day I will find people willing to give me food and shelter. I know that if all else fails I can return to my husband and children and my former life, but I am not sure I could do that now. Rabbi Jesus has opened my heart to a way of living, with and for Yahweh, that I never imagined when I sat at the feet of the village Rabbi and learnt all about the laws we must keep if we were to please Yahweh. Rabbi Jesus tells us that Yahweh loves us no matter what we have done. If we are sorry, and want to make amends, then he will take us in his arms and love us as we have never been loved before. If we turn our backs to him, he will walk behind us, ready and waiting until we turn to him again. It doesn't matter if I don't give a tenth of my income to the poor, if I give generously, if I give beyond what I can really afford, if I give with love, then that is all Yahweh requires. He isn't counting the coins and rejecting me because I have only given a ninth of my income. When my husband is cutting the corn in the field and misses some of the heads, or some fall out of his hands when he is bringing them in from the fields, the poor can garner food with dignity, as our ancestor Ruth did gleaning in the fields of Boaz.

Several times I have heard the story of the Good Samaritan. For any Jew that is a contradiction in terms, for we are taught that all Samaritans are bad. We are taught that when we give alms we should give them to other Jews, but Rabbi Jesus story tells of the Samaritan giving money to the Innkeeper to look after the injured Jewish Traveller. He should have been looked after by the first people who passed by; the Priest and the Levite. They should have stopped. They should have had compassion. They should have practised what they preach, and what they expect us to live. Rabbi

Jesus seems to practice what he preaches, and that is one of the many things about him that made me give up everything to follow him. However we have rested long enough outside this village. Rabbi Jesus is going to talk to the men taking a lunch break from their work in the fields, and I with the rest of the women must find bed and food for tonight.