

PHILIP GROVES

The Least in the Community of Jesus as Examples for Leadership Today

The ordination of women has incorporated some women into the church's leadership, but it has, perhaps, done little to challenge the clericalism that so easily pervades a professional ministry. Philip Groves is spurred by his Tanzanian context and the study of Mark's Gospel to find in the women in the gospel new models for leaders and followers of Jesus.

Training people for Christian ministry is challenging and exciting in whatever context, but to do so in a culture and a language which is not your own is, in my opinion, especially so. I have found that I have been able to challenge my students over their cultural assumptions and that they have challenged me about mine. My observation that the women disciples in the gospel of Mark give us a role model for Christian ministry has emerged within this dialogue of mutual challenge.

Since 1993 I have been teaching a course on the gospel of Mark at a theological college in the centre of Tanzania. Our students come from different tribes and from different parts of this country, but they all use Kiswahili as a common language. The majority of them are men preparing for ordination or ordained men doing further training, with one or two women training for other kinds of service in the church. In the Anglican Church in Tanzania women are not ordained, even as deacons.

One of the challenges of teaching in Kiswahili is that there is only one commentary for our students to refer to and this commentary is of a style which tends to treat each pericope as an isolated text ignoring the development of the story¹. To compensate, my teaching focused on the flow of the text and especially upon the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, hoping to find their lessons for Christian leaders.

Discipleship and leadership in the church in Tanzania

Christian discipleship and leadership are areas of perceived weakness in the church in much of Africa. This is true of the Anglican Church in Tanzania. Churches here

1 This commentary is a translation of John Hargreaves, *A Guide to St Mark's Gospel* (1st

edn), International Study Guides 2, SPCK, London 1965.

are good at proclaiming the gospel and making converts, but poor at helping these new Christians to live in the way of Christ. Christian leadership is often seen as involving the leading of worship in the correct way and the administration of discipline. The focus of confirmation training is often the rote learning of the creed and the Lord's prayer, rather than preparation for Christian living. Excommunication is a common practice in East Africa (usually for the sin of sex outside marriage) and church leaders are responsible for its administration. Thus the two themes are linked. Local leadership is weak and so those who are converted are not helped to become disciples.

When I discuss with our students the classic models of the church set forward in Dulles' book of that name² they recognise their church in the model of the church as institution.³ In this system Bishops are the pinnacle of the triangle with the laity at the bottom and the clergy between. The bishop is the ultimate holder of the truth in his diocese. I know of cases where clergy have been reprimanded for what seem to me to be minor deviations from the diocesan line. The bishop is in charge of discipline. While every pastor has the power of excommunication the Bishop can always overrule and it is he alone who can excommunicate and forgive the clergy. Thirdly, the bishops govern. Our students are amazed at the relative powerlessness of English bishops. Posts are not advertised in Tanzania, they are filled by the Bishop sending people. It is not uncommon for clergy to have as little notice as one week before a move and not unheard of to be told you are moving by the driver of the lorry who has come for you your family and all your possessions there and then. One of our students was given three days notice that he was coming to college.

Bishops are known as 'Fathers in God'. I have heard it said that the Bishops have taken on the role of Tribal Chiefs, paternally deciding what is best for their people. This may have some truth in it, but it is also true that they stand in the tradition of the missionary bishops before them. These pioneers of the gospel were necessarily strong independent people with a firm belief they were right. The institution of the church today reflects the foundation they laid. However, it can be said that the hierarchical system of government is culturally acceptable to many of the tribes in Tanzania, reflecting the kind of leadership which people expect.

It is important to note that the kind of leadership I have set out is not imposed upon the people, but often welcomed and expected. More open forms of government are often feared and disliked. This is seen in the way that the Pentecostal churches as well as the Lutherans and Moravians in Tanzania have moved towards an Episcopal system.

Many bishops try to resist being the peak of the triangle. For example, they may not accept the position of the guest of honour at a service where they are not officiating and they may sit in an ordinary pew, but the people feel awkward and even insulted by such behaviour and try to pass honour on to their bishop in a way which is hard to resist.

2 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Doubleday, New York 1978.

3 Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p 39ff.

Discipleship and leadership in Mark

In this context the students and I study the interweaving themes of Mark's gospel, looking for teaching on discipleship and leadership. In Mark, each pericope relates to others and to the whole, so as we go through the gospel I constantly challenge my students to understand each section in relationship to those which came before and after.

The challenge for me was to understand the final section in this way. In some ways the statement of faith of the centurion in Mark 15:39 gives a fitting climax to the gospel. The following verses (Mark 15:40 – 16:8), with their overall focus on the women followers of Jesus,⁴ seem like an appendix detached from the whole, important only for the declaration of the resurrection. This in itself is problematic, as there seems no reason to us why Mark does not record any encounters with the risen Christ. How do these verses about these women who are ignored through the rest of the gospel, relate to the whole? I was prepared to say that they do not, but found myself coming to the surprising, and in the Tanzanian context, shocking conclusion that these women are for Mark the example of Christian living and service. These women stand as an example for all Christian leadership.

This conclusion emerged through my study of the Gospel and through a growing understanding of young and developing church in a male-dominated society. This is the context in which Mark wrote his gospel and in which I live and teach in Tanzania.

The failure of the apostles

Before we move on it is important to look at the obvious role models in Mark, the twelve apostles. They and their relationship with Jesus are very important for Mark and are at the core of the Gospel.⁵ When Jesus calls them they follow. They do not yet know who they are following or where they are following him to, they have not heard him preach and have seen no miracles.⁶ Thus unconditional following and loyalty is their first response. Their second response is incomprehension. When they do see his miracles they are as amazed as anyone and ask 'Who is this?' (Mark 4:41). The evil spirits know who Jesus is, but the disciples are completely bemused. They are offered 'the secret of the kingdom' (Mark 4:11), but they cannot understand the parables within which the secret is told (Mark 4:13). When they are sent out by Jesus, they are able to preach, to drive out demons and to heal (Mark 6:7-13), but when they are challenged to go further and to feed a crowd who have followed him they cannot imagine how it can be done (Mark 6:37).

The repetition of the feeding miracle in Mark emphasises the ignorance of the apostles.⁷ We are amazed that they cannot remember what Jesus did in a similar

4 Although Joseph is the focus of Mark 15:42-46.

5 For a fuller account of the relationship of loyalty and incomprehension between Jesus and the twelve see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1989, pp 8-14 and pp 89-117.

6 This is consistent with John 1:35ff (especially 1:50) where the disciples follow before the first sign.

7 Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, SPCK, London 1971, p 156.

situation before. They cannot remember and they do not believe that anyone can feed this crowd (Mark 8:4). Jesus' frustration with them comes to a head on the boat crossing the sea. The disciples again fail to understand his words and Jesus castigates them for their hardened hearts and says, 'Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?' (Mark 8:18).

Mark uses the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida as a parable for the opening of the eyes of the apostles to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah⁸. The implication is that it is the miraculous power of God which enables Peter to make his confession of faith rather than any special insight of his own. That his understanding is still incomplete is shown in the command to silence and in teaching which follows. Jesus needs to teach them that the way of the Messiah is service, suffering and death. In the section often called 'The Way', he teaches the disciples privately three times⁹ that he will suffer and die, Peter, James and John alone once¹⁰ and the crowd¹¹ once also.

The clarity of this teaching leaves us no doubt as to the nature of Christian discipleship as service and suffering, but again the disciples fail to understand. Firstly, Peter has the audacity to rebuke Jesus and is rejected as Satan. Then they begin to argue as to who is the greatest (Mark 9: 33-34). This prompts Jesus to emphasise the humility necessary to be a disciple, taking a small child as an example of how they should be and introducing the enigmatic phrase, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last' (Mark 9:36). This does not stop them arrogantly rebuking someone for casting out demons simply because he is not one of them (Mark 9:38), or from chasing children away as not worthy of meeting Jesus (Mark 10:13), nor does it stop James and John from jockeying for top positions, or the others being annoyed as they wanted the best places as well (Mark 10:37, 41).

The shock created by Jesus' response to the request of James and John is understandable within the Tanzanian situation. Leadership in Africa is honoured by the right to sit at the high place. African culture is very conscious of rank and all gatherings are to some extent formal. When visiting a house where there are a limited number of useable chairs, there is a distinct pecking order as to who has the best ones. Who sits where at a celebration of any kind is carefully planned to give most honour to those who are deemed to deserve it due to their rank and status. The best food is offered to them and they must leave full, even if others of a lower status go hungry.

Guests of honour may try to sit with others of lower rank, however, the hosts and other guests are uneasy with this. They feel that not only are they insulting the guest, but also that the guest is insulting them. Shame is felt on both sides. This is the shocking nature of the teaching Jesus gave to his disciples and which

8 William L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, NIC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1974, p 286.
Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, p 102, where Kingsbury also sees parallels between the initial partial sight of the man and the partial

understanding of the disciples only fulfilled after the resurrection.

9 Mark 8:31-32, 9:30-32, 10:32-34, (see also 10:30).

10 Mark 9:9-13.

11 Mark 8:34-9: 1.

in turn comes to us. Christian leaders are called not to accept the high place but the low place. We are called to live in shame. If we want to be first we should live like slaves.

Titles are very important in African culture. Even by close friends I am usually referred to as Mchungaji (pastor) or Kasisi (priest) rather than by my name. These titles are deemed to be of greater status than Mwalimu (teacher). As I am involved in teaching, I sometimes claim the title 'Mwalimu', but most Tanzanians refuse to call me that because it demeans me. Titles confer status and respect, religious titles high honour, ironically the kind of status Jesus asks us to renounce.

On the surface British culture is quite different. We value egalitarianism. Many of us find the idea of being subservient to the royal family anachronistic and within the church we have no problem with dissent with our bishops, even to the point of appealing to alternative episcopal oversight. We need reminding that the concept here is quite shocking and radical so we too can learn what it is to be servants.

It becomes clear that the men who are most closely identified as being the followers of Jesus constantly failed to understand or accept this teaching. They follow, but in the hope of human glory and honour not in the anticipation of shame. They are happy to be involved in the triumphal entry but within a week they have all left and betrayed him.

The first and most famous betrayal is that of Judas, but all the others leave him also. At the end of Chapter 13 Jesus calls them all to 'watch' (Mark 13:37), but when they are pressed to fulfil this command in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:34,37,38) all they can do is sleep. One of the group tries to resist with force, but when they see that the way of Jesus is to submit they all run away (Mark 14:50). In the garden Jesus is abandoned spiritually and physically. This is emphasised in the story of Peter's denial. In Kiswahili the words used for to know and to understand are identical. They illustrate the truth that while Peter is lying when he says he does not know Jesus, he has never understood him.

In Mark, Jesus is left isolated and alone, unable to call out to his friends and companions. He dies alone even calling out to God, whom up to now he has always called father, that even he has abandoned him.

However, Jesus is not quite alone. He seems unaware of the women who watch from a distance, but Mark is not. We have heard nothing about them through the gospel, but now we are told that they accompanied him throughout his ministry and from here they take centre stage until the confusing end of the gospel at Mark 16:8.

Women in Mark as models of discipleship and leadership

The women are often regarded as minor characters in the text,¹² or important for their witness to the resurrection rather than for themselves.¹³ I want to suggest that the women are more than mere foils, but are examples for all Christian disciples.¹⁴

12 Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, p 27.

13 Lane, *Mark*, p 577.

All the women encountered by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark respond with faith. Simon's mother-in-law immediately serves Jesus on her recovery (Mark 1:31b); the woman who had bled for twelve years is made well by her faith (Mark 5:25-34); the woman from Syro-Phoenicia has the faith to believe that the kingdom has wider boundaries than those of the nation of Israel¹⁵ (Mark 7:25-30), and a poor widow is for Jesus an example of discipleship in the way gives everything (Mark 12:41-44). The unknown woman of Mark 14: 3-9 recognises Jesus as king¹⁶ while anointing him for burial. This dual recognition of Jesus as suffering king is so remarkable that Jesus says that she will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. The fact that none of these women are named, but referred to in relation to someone else or to something else shows their lowly place in the community both of Jesus and of the time.

As we have seen, Christian discipleship is understood in the terms set out in Mark as following and service. If we ask the question, who within the community of the followers of Jesus served with humility, never seeking honour? we now find the answer, 'These women had followed him and cared for all his needs.' (Mark 15:41). It is the women who follow Christ in humility and who observe his suffering, no doubt feeling in their hearts the pain of his death.

It has been argued that the women are able to be present at the end as they do not pose the same kind of threat to the establishment as do the male disciples and since they are almost invisible they are safe.¹⁷ However, it seems unlikely to me that these women would not have faced the threat of persecution because of their connection to such an unorthodox cause. Kenneth Bailey¹⁸ has shown just how shameful it would have been for these women to travel around with Jesus and his male companions. It is inconceivable that they did not feel the weight of the scandalous lives they were living. They, as well as the male disciples, would have been shielded while Jesus was popular, but now they would have been as vulnerable as the men, if not more so.

Their dedication to Jesus does not end with his death. They observe where he is buried and they take the first opportunity to anoint his body. They do not seem to expect the resurrection, but even the act of going to anoint the body is an act of faith as they do not know how they will roll away the stone.

It is to these faithful, humble and fearless women disciples that the first news of the resurrection is given. It is the last in the community of Christ who are the first to hear the good news. We have noted their anonymity through this gospel (which is repeated in others) and this points to their low status. This is reinforced by our knowledge of Jewish society of the time where women were on a level

14 H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark, A Japanese Feminist Perspective*, Orbis, New York, p 96.

15 See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, SCM, London 1990, p 146. I have heard Moltmann expound how he believes she becomes Jesus' teacher on this issue in a lecture at Manchester University.

16 Moltmann, *The Way*, p 146.

17 H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p 96.

18 Kenneth Bailey, *Women in the New Testament*, Anvil 11 (1994) p 8.

with slaves. Women were bought by their husbands and served them as their masters¹⁹ and the social attitudes of the other disciples, if not of Jesus himself, would have placed them at the bottom of even this community. That the last hear first demonstrates the reversal of the hierarchy of the world and gives us a glimpse of the hierarchy of the kingdom. Here we can discover what God demands of us and what kind of life he honours.

In Tanzania the social standing of women is not so far removed from that of the time of Jesus. A 'binti' or young unmarried woman is constantly made aware of her low place within the community. She is given menial tasks which she longs to hand on to younger sisters, alongside menial tasks which she shares with the older women and which she knows will be hers for life. She is required to sweep and clean, to fetch water, to weed the fields, to look after the children and to prepare and cook food as well as to clear up afterwards. Women eat with the children. If there is a table the men will eat at the table, the women and children on the floor. Marriage, motherhood and age will improve her social standing, as will education and economic freedom through paid employment, but at every level women are considered inferior to men.

This is seen in names and in greetings. A binti is called by her given name, but when she marries she improves her social standing by taking on the name of her husband. Just as with the women in the gospel, women are rarely called by their own names. In Tanzania the use of a woman's given name is considered of less value than relating her to her husband or child. The importance of motherhood over womanhood is seen in the way that a woman takes on the name of her child. For example, my wife is known either to Tanzanians as Mama Mchungaji, a title which reflects my honour upon her, or as Mama Jonathan, reflecting the honour of being the mother of a child. It would be considered insulting to her and quite shameful to call her by her given name. In Tanzania this subservience is reinforced by the use of a greeting not used in other parts of East Africa. A junior will greet a superior with a 'Shikamoo'. A Bishop, is greeted with a 'Shikamoo' by almost everyone, a binti by no one. A bishop would only offer a 'Shikamoo' only to his father, a binti to all but her younger siblings and fellow bintis. To be a binti is to live in shame, to live as a Christian leader is to live in honour.

The ending of the gospel of Mark challenges this order. The Christian disciple is challenged to live in shame,²⁰ to be the servant of all and to take on the attitude of the binti. To the Christian leader the challenge is most acute. The binti becomes the model for Christian life and leadership.

Servant leadership in the church

To understand the implications of this interpretation it is helpful to be clear as to what is not being argued. Firstly, I am not arguing that women were dominant in

19 Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus*, SCM Press, London 1967, pp 367-369.

20 H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p 98.

the leadership of the Markan community. It does seem clear that there were women leaders in the early church,²¹ but not to the exclusion of men and even this cannot be inferred from Mark.

In the Tanzanian context this is not an argument in favour of the ordination of women. The arguments for and against are many and complex, but this teaching is not about who should be ordained, but the attitude of those who are disciples and leaders.

On the other hand, this interpretation must not be used as an excuse for the continuance of oppressive structures. Rewards in heaven should not be used to justify the subservient position of women in the church and in the home. The women in the gospel are an example of discipleship for both men and women, not women alone. It is important that both men and women do not follow the example of the twelve in their striving for human glory, but follow the example of the women in their following and service.

In saying this I am not arguing that we have no need of leaders. Leaders are needed to encourage the Christian community with a vision which leads the community forwards into deeper service and growth. Leaders are needed to identify those with gifts within the community and enable them to use those gifts for the sake of the community and for the glory of God. There is also a need to offer discipline to the community and to speak out for justice, while always offering forgiveness. The question is what kind of leadership do we need?

What is needed is humble servant leadership. Leadership can be given in humility, but it is not easy. It involves rejecting the role models in the world around us. It is threatening to those who traditionally have power and status and to those who traditionally serve, but it is more threatening to those who value their honour as H. Kinukawa points out from within a Japanese setting.²² However, it is liberating for all. Many African clergy use their title, their special clothes and their education to gain authority. They often portray themselves as closer to God than the laity. However, this is a myth which is often hard to sustain and deeply damaging. Lay preachers with a gift for preaching are seen as a threat and silenced. Lay people with a gift for healing or for casting out demons are told not to use their gifts as to use them will cast the parish priest in an inferior light. As they damage their parishes they become damaged also and live with the insecurity of having their imperfections uncovered. To see yourself as a servant among servants is liberating for the leader as well as the church. It is liberating in that a myth does not need to be maintained and we see ourselves as God sees us.

It is easy for this challenge to become racist in character: me a westerner, influenced by feminism and the supposed equality of women in my culture, criticising African culture and traditions. However, the challenge is mutual. The women of the gospel and the binti of Tanzanian culture should be examples for

21 Kenneth Bailey, *Women in the New Testament*, p 9ff.

22 H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p 91.

all Christian disciples and leaders, male or female, white or black. The challenge is to me the European, one of those who has so often lorded over the African. Living in Tanzania I have to work out what it means to live in humble service while so many say 'Shikamoo' to me.

I also feel challenged about my life and assumptions prior to coming to Tanzania. Did I, in my own support of women's ordination, have the motive of sharing honour, rather than the motive of giving up honour? The challenge is not that a small group of men in the church allow a small group of women to join them in the place of honour, but that all should share in the place of shame. The place given to the women at the end of the gospel needs to revolutionise our notion of who and what is important to God. Leadership is important, but more important is service within whatever role. I am concerned that the debate over the ordination of women has too often over-stressed the importance of ordination. Those of us who are ordained, both men and women, need to remember that this does not by itself bring us any closer to God. Ordination is a statement about our role not our relationship with God and the bible is consistent in stressing the overriding importance of the latter.

The commissioning of the twelve has been seen by some to be a prototype of ordination, but the observation that the women who faithfully served him were closer to Jesus than the twelve shows the assumption that leaders must be closer to God to be untrue. Once that myth is destroyed, leaders are free to encourage the gifts of all without needing to prove they are the greatest. This is liberating for them and for the community and it is why humble leadership is imperative in the church at every level both in the developed world and in the developing world.

It is therefore my contention that the switch of focus onto the women at the end of the gospel is no accident. Mark, among other things, was writing to encourage and equip a young church beginning to organise itself. He fears that old power models will dominate and devastate the structure of the church and emphasises the call of Jesus for his followers to travel with him in shame down the way of suffering service. This is a relevant message to the churches of today. In Tanzania the leadership of a male dominated church needs to imitate the example of the least in its community and in Britain we need to see that power sharing is not the same as the threatening, but ultimately liberating, call to humble service.

The Revd Philip Groves is a tutor at St Philip's College, Kongwa, Tanzania, and a mission partner of the Church Mission Society.