

Thinking about Dalit women as 'lost' in their own homes

Read Luke 15: 8 - 10

Dalit women in India are the least, the last and the lost.

Many Dalit and Tribal women suffer utter poverty, abused by those members of their families who should care for them, their precious lives and voices lost in the 'dark' and 'dusty' places of their own homes.

Women are given value in this parable, as God is portrayed in a feminine image, as a woman who sweeps the dust and dirt to find her lost coin. She searches diligently, carefully, methodically, she finds that which is lost, and her friends are invited to a joyful celebration.

What are the similarities between the lost Dalit women and the silver coin?

How might the image of 'God' cleaning the house be empowering for a Dalit woman?

Caste erects barriers

Read Matthew 15: 21 - 28

Jesus has deliberately travelled north to the area of Tyre and Sidon, into a Gentile area. Through this conversation, the woman is forced to stand up for herself, to believe and declare herself worthy, in spite of everything which tells her she deserves to be downtrodden. Her need and her love for her daughter helps her to fight for her right to be heard.

She claims the same rights as 'the children of Israel' and is praised for her 'great faith'.

Caste erects barriers which separate, segregate, exploit and humiliate those at the bottom of the social structure.

What might constitute a barrier in your community?

When have you been excluded or made to feel different?

If you were a Dalit woman, how might this story challenge you, encourage you, embolden you, affirm you?

Who is my neighbour?

Read Luke 10: 25 - 37

This parable has within it themes of social and religious conventions, racial differences, and the threat of pollution through touch.

Those who might be expected to help the wounded traveller ignore his plight, while the despised Samaritan shows him kindness.

Do the feelings of the Samaritan matter in this story? Supposing the wounded traveller had refused the help of the despised Samaritan?

What should be the attitude of those who offer aid?

'Love your neighbour as yourself?'

Who is my neighbour, in need of justice and kindness and my support, or the support of my Christian community?

How could you express solidarity with a Dalit or Tribal woman?

Segregation extends to every part of life

Read John 4 : 1 - 26

Jesus says 'Give me a drink' and in so doing, he breaks every code of conduct in the Jewish law. Never would a Jewish man ask a favour of a woman of a different race and religion, least of all a Samaritan woman. What's more, he shares a drink from the same vessel as the woman.

Jesus is willing to break all the boundaries to offer living water to the woman.

Dalits are not permitted to drink from the same drinking vessels as non-Dalits, or to draw water from the same wells.

How has this encounter recognised the woman's value? How does the encounter change her life?

Is this Bible story helpful to those who have no well or pump in their village, and who have to walk miles for dirty water?

Are there ways in which you identify with the woman at the well?

Triply oppressed

Read Mark 12:38 - 13:2

Because of where this story is set within the Gospel - Jesus has been speaking quite harshly about the leaders of the Temple and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees - it highlights the contrast between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, what society sees, and what Jesus sees. Notice how the Temple structures keep this woman in her place.

For Dalit Christians, sacrifice is at the heart of their faith, because Christians - and Muslims - are not entitled to the government reservation for Dalits, and because they can suffer persecution from their families when they embrace the Gospel.

Do you see similarities between this woman, triply oppressed by her society, and the triple oppression of a Dalit woman?

Do you think that society and church structures keep people in their place in your context?

Sinned against or sinning?

Read Luke 7 : 36 - 50

Jesus had a reputation for eating and drinking with tax collectors and 'sinners' - sharing table fellowship with such people was totally unacceptable in Jewish society.

The woman in this story honours Jesus, whereas Simon had ignored the social conventions of hospitality and welcome.

Thousands of Dalit girls are sold by desperately poor parents, or forced into prostitution every year. Most girls and women in India's urban brothels come from Dalit, tribal, or minority communities.

The *Devadasi* dedication of young girls to temples, although illegal, continues as a system of ritual sexual abuse, which stigmatises and enslaves a woman and her resulting children for the whole of her life.

Can you see how controversial Jesus' behaviour was?

How quick are we to make judgments about the behaviour and lifestyles of others, without really understanding the issues?