

## **Mary Sumner Day 2018      God's unruly women**

Today we celebrate the life of a woman of great faith; of great courage and with a true vision of kingdom values. A woman who had to think for herself; persevere and set forth into uncharted territory. Of course, we are thinking about Mary Sumner.....but we could also think about the Canaanite woman we have just heard about. They both spoke out – we know Mary was so very nervous that she could not speak at her first public meeting. Imagine how nervous the Canaanite woman must have been. She was a Gentile and quite beyond the pale as far as Jews were concerned. Yet she was so desperate that she approached the Rabbi Jesus and spoke up. But Jesus did not answer her all.

Mary Sumner also took a huge leap of faith when she spoke out. The rearing of children was women's business. Undervalued. Taken for granted. Unimportant to Victorian society. Mary took another leap – her idea of support and help for mothers and families transcended social class. Another outrageous idea. Not only did mothers warrant nurture and care doing the invisible work of women, - all families - rich families, poor families and everything in between were equally valuable in Mary's eyes.

So you see, Mary, like the Canaanite woman had something to be nervous about – they were both pushing hard against the cultural and social norms. Saying something new. Something out with the accepted thinking and expectations. They had to be brave. Risk failure and humiliation.

Mary and the Canaanite woman also have something else in common – they were not easily deterred and they must have said the same words “It is not fair”. “It is not fair that my child has to suffer, surely God can offer some help to outsiders; surely God is just and merciful even to dogs – the unworthy, the lowest”. And Mary might have said, “it is not fair that new mothers, all mothers and families have to struggle in isolation or need or ignorance. Surely with God's help something can be done”.

The initial responses might have been in a similar vein. Jesus said that he was “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. But he was caused to think again. Mary may have met a lack of understanding or resistance or apathy in the beginning. Her vision for a better life for women and families would have needed hard work and much resilience.

The common denominator is of course, faith. Unswerving faith in God. Mary and the Canaanite women equally tapped into the mind of God. They knew that nobody was beyond the help of God; that healing, renewal, life giving care and love is the very nature of the divine Trinity. They also knew that this love and care is mediated here on earth – through the words of Jesus who walked this world and through the capable hands and minds of women and let's not forget men, who nurture families everywhere.

The reward for this unswerving faith was of course healing for the Canaanite woman's daughter and the creative flame that ignited to form The Mother's Union. Who knows who the Canaanite woman went on to tell everyone about that man Jesus; how the word spread through the Gentile territories? It was such an important event that it has been recorded and communicated over two millennia. It was a pivotal moment – there is no ambiguity – Jesus is for all. Jew, Gentile, man, woman, rich, poor, everyone. The love of God enfolds all. The family of God is inclusive. It does not leave someone out because they are the wrong colour, or the wrong class or the wrong sexuality. There is no wrong, no misfit or outcast.

Mary made no exclusion based on social class or status, colour or ethnicity. Who could have guessed that her idea would spread around the world encouraging, educating, nurturing people of faith or none, advocating for education, justice and empowerment for so many.

Mary and the Canaanite woman brought about something very important – change. Their faith was the catalyst for change; the energy, the courage, the vision that brought something new.

Yes, they were in their way, unruly. The Canaanite woman would not take no for an answer; she dared to step outside of the role that culture and society had locked her into; she dared to challenge Jesus. Mary Sumner dared to change the way society and the church saw mothers and families; she dared to challenge the status quo that deemed family life entirely private and kept needless suffering behind closed doors. Both the Canaanite woman and Mary shone the light of Christ into places that were in need of love, healing and nourishment. In fact Mary and the unnamed woman are two in a long chain of women who dared to challenge, dared to dream of change and breathe that dream into existence.

Today is a celebration of the life and work and vision of Mary Sumner. Let us give thanks for our sister in Christ. Let us give thanks for all the unknown women who have given their hearts and hands, their strong bodies and minds to improve, comfort and enlighten; those who risked and sometimes lost their lives in the struggle for equality, justice and a decent life for children. And we pray for those for whom the struggle goes on.

I'll finish on a wee beatitude by Nicola Slee. It could surely have been written about Mary Sumner.

Blessed is she who consents to the Word.

***Blessed is she who dares.***

Blessed is she who hears the Word

***Blessed is she who believes.***

Blessed is she who kindles the Word

***Blessed is she who inspires.***

Blessed is she who sets free the Word.

***Blessed is she who empowers.***

Blessed is she who enfleshes the Word.

***Blessed is she who embodies God. Amen.*** (Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary*, 2007, SPCK)

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