

# Who Do You Say that I Am?

Musa W. Dube

wenkosi@hotmail.com

---

## ABSTRACT

This article is an amalgam of four talks given over several days at The Community of Women and Men in Mission Conference. The overall title 'Who do you say that I am?' covers the subjects of Jesus the Liberator, The Healer, The One Who Empowers, and The One Who Sends Us. The author explores these issues in the context of Africa and opens a very illuminating set of questions.

**Keywords:** Jesus, Gender, Liberation, today, family, marriage, sex work, HIV/AIDS

Who do people say that I am?  
And they answered him, John the Baptist;  
And Others Elijah  
And still others, one of the prophets.  
Jesus answered them: *But YOU, who do you say that I am?*  
Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah'  
And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone (Mk 8.27-30).

The people who had heard Jesus and followed his ministry firmly place him within the prophetic tradition. Prophets as we know from the Hebrew Bible, were social analysts and critics. It is therefore, gratifying that the crowds had perceived Jesus as standing firmly within the prophetic traditions. They saw Jesus as one who called people to rectify their relationship with God and with each other. They saw Jesus as a social analyst and critic who called for healthy and just social relationship between different groups and classes and with God. This expectation took diverse forms, but one thing was central to the belief and meaning of the expected 'Christ': it was linked to justice and liberation.

Our church traditions often name Jesus for us. But which traditions – oppressive or liberating ones? Jesus asks us 'Who do you say that I am?' and so it is insufficient for us to retain and use only the received

Christology. Rather, we must name Christ for ourselves. Naming is often a very gendered practice. Hence gender studies of biblical literature have shown that the biblical God is largely named in male terms such as Shepherd, King, Lord, Mighty Warrior, Father, but hardly ever as Bakerwoman, Midwife, Mother, Friend. So we women must name Christ for ourselves—beyond what is written in the Bible or what we have heard in our churches.

### *Social Location: Reading Ourselves*

The tension between, 'What the crowds/people say and what you say,' brings me to an important lens of self analysis, namely social location. Every person is sociology located and socially constructed by society into a number of relationships that empower or disempower them.

Clearly, social location is complex. It involves gender, ethnicity, race, national, international, class and health status. Social location involves a number of institutions such as family, church and university. Each of these social factors and institutions define me—they either give me power or disempower me; they allow me to speak or to be silenced, depending where I am and who I am with. Sometimes I can silence others. Further, my social location defines my experience and how I shall name Jesus or read the text.

Gender, which I define here as the social construction of men and women, distributes power unequally amongst boys and girls; amongst men and women, wives and husbands in many cultures. Gender as a 'social construct' begins at birth and marks all the stages of women and men in their lives. The family, the school, the church, the village/city and countries of our origin, more often than not gender locates women as without voice, without property, without independent identity or power to make and implement their own decisions in the society. Consequently, many women have indeed internalized their own marginalization as normal—for, from the family to government, women are more often than not denied power—they have no access to leadership, resources and independent space. They have no female models of leadership and power. Therefore, many women are yet to answer the question: But you, who do you say that I am? for themselves.

### *Jesus Liberates Us from Oppressive Political and Economic Structures*

Liberation has various dimensions. It must encompass all aspects of our lives such as spiritual, intellectual, physical, economic, political, cultural and social. It is a process of examining our relationships and asking how and why they hinder our personal and collective realization

and growth. It is a process that asks how our social relationships may hinder us from access to our dreams – both as individuals or certain groups of people.

Jesus was born in a country where there was political exploitation at the national and international level. Social rootlessness and homelessness also became common. Jesus and his disciples chose to express their solidarity with the poor and marginalized. We thus see Jesus and his disciples leaving their jobs and homes and walking around preaching and teaching and living on minimal economic goods (Mt. 4.18-22; Lk. 10.4-7; Mk. 10.28).

However, Jesus' own words and deeds also confirm that he is a liberator from political and economic oppression, not just a victim of it. This is particularly captured in the first public sermon preached by Jesus.

*'The Spirit of God is upon me  
For he has anointed me to  
Bring good news to those who are poor,  
He has sent me to proclaim release to those who are captive  
Recovery of sight to those who are blind  
To let those who are oppressed go free  
To proclaim the year of the Lord.  
And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.  
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus, who began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. They said, 'Is this not Joseph's son? (Lk.4:16-22).*

He stunned all when he said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. Not tomorrow, not next week, not next month, not the next season, nor next year – the liberation for the poor, the captives, the oppressed, the blind, the imprisoned cannot and must not wait: it is and must be *today*.

Jesus who knows that there is a sinful disproportional distribution of economic resources in this world, announces the Jubilee of the Lord – *today!* This is a direct challenge to both the Jewish national leaders and the Roman Empire, whose political and economic structures exploited many. *Today*, Jesus is saying, 'you stop your exploitation'. *Today*, Jesus is saying, 'we are redistributing wealth and land to the landless and dispossessed'. By announcing the year of the Lord, Jesus is saying, *Today* we are returning those houses that we bought, leaving many homeless. *Today* we are setting all the captives free: the political prisoners that we have shut away, the cultural prisoners that we have deprived of power as of low caste, as women, as black people, as indigenous groups. We are setting free those who are culturally downtrodden due to their colour, ethnicity, race, gender, disability or caste or migrant status. *Today*, we are healing the sick, those who

are deprived of sufficient food and medicine. Those who do not have money to pay doctors or buy medicine and health insurance policies. *Today* we are giving sight to the blind. *Today* we are proclaiming the good news to the poor. *Today, yes, today.*

It is, therefore, not an excuse to say that we have to slowly introduce liberation of all kinds, for women, the elderly, and so on. Nor is it acceptable to sit back and endure your own oppression.

#### *Liberation from Oppressive Religious Institutions and Spirituality*

One of the most entrenched types of oppression happens in religious institutions. It can be the most dangerous for people then say, 'It is the church: it is a holy place, we cannot criticize it'. It is the Reverend, the Bishop, the Priest: he is a holy man of God'. 'It is the Bible, the Scripture, the holy word of God'. Jesus the Liberator was born to a godly people, who feared God and he lived in a fully developed religion of the Jews. The religion of his people had scriptures, such as the law, the prophets, wisdom and other traditions. It had synagogues and the Temple. And then it had personnel of various levels such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and teachers, and a High Priest who studied, interpreted and taught the scriptures to people. Jesus also lived in a world where many of these spiritual institutions, structures, practices and religious leaders had become downright oppressive.

Jesus respected scriptures (Mt. 5.17-18), but he did not spare them where they were found authorizing oppression. So we are warned that as followers of Jesus the liberator, it is not acceptable to open a text and show it to any group of people and individuals in order to deny their right. 'It is not acceptable for us to open 1 Tim. 2.8-11 and say to our women, 'The Bible says women should be silent in church'. Neither is it acceptable to open 1 Tim. 3 and quote that the Bible says, 'Now a leader of the church must be a man...who rules his wife and children as well'. These scriptural-based exclusions are not acceptable, precisely because if we invite Jesus here and ask him about these scriptures Jesus will say: 'You have heard what was said to you, 'Women must not speak in the Church', but I say to you, I have poured my Spirit upon all flesh'.

Similarly, Jesus was against the interpretation of Scriptures that sanctioned oppression. This is clearly demonstrated by the Sabbath controversies. One such good example is found in Lk. 10.10-17, about the woman who was bent over for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her he said, 'Woman, you are free from your ailment'. The woman was healed. But the leader of the synagogue was angry that Jesus healed her on the Sabbath. Clearly, Jesus says she must not be allowed to stay in her physical oppression even for one more day. *Today* she must be liberated from her bodily bondage.

### *Oppression through Age*

We also unleash oppression on people based on age. Our children are subjected to sexual abuse in the family, church and school. They are made into child soldiers, subjected to child labour. They are sold into prostitution, genitally mutilated and exposed to HIV/AIDS by elderly men who seek to cleanse themselves. Our children are denied their rights and their childhood through poverty. Similarly, in some cultures old people are stereotyped as witches while in some other parts they are killed during the night.

The liberating agenda of Jesus broke the age walls that render children powerless and prone to oppression. Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to them'. Children own the kingdom. Jesus said those who want to inherit the kingdom of God must be like children. They are the model of faith to be imitated by all of us. Jesus said 'Whoever welcomes a child welcomes God. God dwells in children and children dwell with God. This positioning of children, renders child abuse and marginalization unacceptable for God-fearing Christians, for it is a violation of God and God's kingdom itself.

Similarly, Jesus withdrew the stigma surrounding age and gender. He depicts the widow who gives all as representing the best of faith and giving. He insists on the empowerment of widows (Lk. 21.2-4).

Jesus is our liberator and he insists that our liberation is inseparable from all factors of our social lives.

### *Christ, you are our healer*

Healing is...liberation from patriarchal expectations of roles, abusive relationships, constricting stereotypes, and growth-stifling situations. Wholeness is...self esteem, freedom of choice, creative and mutually fulfilling relationships, spiritual nurture and growth (Nancy Hadersty, 1996: 137).

Naming Jesus as the healer is critically important for two reasons. First, because a significant part of the ministry of Jesus involved healing. It is, therefore, a central part of our mission as Christian women and men to bring healing to the world. Secondly, the world is rocking with 34.5 million HIV/AIDS infections and the numbers are still rising. This disease brings untold human suffering. In this HIV/AIDS context, the church is challenged to bring the ministry of healing to the hurting world. Today, more than ever, we must name Jesus as the healer; further, to understand that he heals gender injustices too.

### *Gender is a Social Construct: It is Neither Natural nor Divine*

Gender defines the roles that our societies ascribe to us as men and women, and these relationships give more power to men than to

women. Different societies construct gender in their own ways. Moreover, gender oppression works together with other forms of marginalization such as class, race, caste and ethnicity.

In my Setswana culture gender roles are written in the very names that we give to our children at birth. Setswana naming gives children names according to the events surrounding their birth, what they are expected to do, after some of their relatives and who the children look like. In short names are not just names; names have meaning. I was named Musawenkosi, because at my birth my mother almost died, for the placenta remained in her for a week. Fortunately, my paternal grandmother who was a Sangoma (indigenous healer) came and gave her a herb, which removed it. When my mother survived, she named me Musawenkosi, which meant 'I lived by the grace of God'. With the terrible experience that my mother had she did not want to risk giving birth at home again. Hence my younger sister was the first to be born in a hospital and was accordingly named 'Mmasepatela', that is the mother of the hospital. But when my young sister grew up she renamed herself Florence, because my father had virtually refused to name her. My father had turned up at the hospital carrying gifts and the nurses told him the news 'it's a girl'. It was his sixth girl, and by then he only had two boys. My father, I hear, was seized with rage, threw up everything saying 'For Christ's sake what shall I do with all these whores?' This story of naming in my family indicates the use of both event and gender issues.

In Setswana, when children are named according to what they are expected to do, then gender roles become written into our bodies. Our girl-children get such names as Bontle/beauty, Sethunya/Flower, Naledi/Beauty, Morwadi/one who carries, Segametsi/one who fetches water, Mosidi/one who grinds, Lorato/Love, Khumo/ringer of wealth/lobola. Our boys, on the other hand, are Modise/Shepherd, Kgosiet-sile/leader, Moagi/builder, Mojaboswa/inheritor, Moatlhodi/judge.

When I was growing up, I could easily have thought my father did not observe any gender bias, for he demanded work from all of us and highly praised any child who did very well at school. Yet, there were two things that sharply divided us as boy and girl children: only the boys could go to the cattle post. Only boys could drive the tractor. In Setswana thinking, cows are the treasure house, the bank. A man's wealth and honour were measured by the number of cows he owned. Our being debarred from the cattle post was often based on such claims that it is far, it is rough and there is not proper accommodation for sleeping. Nonetheless, when one examines Setswana beliefs, one finds negative links between a cow and a woman's body. A menstruating woman or one who has had an abortion suppresses

the productivity of the cows. Consequently, care is taken that women should not easily walk into the kraal or walk in the middle of a cow herd, for how would you know if they are not in their menstruation or have had an abortion?

Similarly, marriage is another stage where gender roles are fully reiterated and reinforced. The family of the boy comes to propose to the girl's family by saying '*Re tsile go kopa sego sa metsi*' 'we have come to ask for one who will give us water to drink'. This formulaic expression underlies the role of the wife as one who will carry water and give water; namely domestic services and perhaps productivity. The marriage proposal is followed by the paying up of the *lobola*, the bride price. Here the bridegroom buys the reproductive rights of the girl from the father, for the *lobola* gives the man the right to give the children who will be born his name. Without *lobola*, all the children will be regarded as belonging to the girl's family. The *lobola* is usually followed by the wedding day celebration. As the bride enters the home, the guests stand in a line, acting out all the roles expected from a wife. Some will be carrying brooms sweeping, others weeding, some cooking, some nursing a child, some grinding grains, etc. All this happens in the midst of great singing and dancing as the new wife is welcomed.

After the wedding lunch, the old women of the village take the bride into a room. They sit her down and surround her and begin to counsel her about marriage and how to keep it. She is told that she must build and protect her marriage. She should not expose the secrets of their family. If she has been beaten by a husband and gets a black eye, she must cover her eye, and say 'I accidentally hit the wall during the night as I was walking to the toilet'. If her husband sleeps out and sees another woman, she must welcome him in the morning with warm water for bathing. She should not ask where he has been, for *Monna poo ga agekwe lesaka* (a man is a bull, he cannot be confined in a kraal). She must not ask him for '*monna pahafana o a hapanelwa*', that is, a man is like a calabash of beer that we all pass around and drink from! Marriage will be tough, the old women warn the young bride, but '*nyalo e e a tshoketwa*'; that is, you must be long suffering and endure the marriage. You must respect your husband, don't talk back. And you must remember the way to a man's heart is food: you must make sure his food is ready all the time. When this hard counselling is taking place indoors, the bridegroom and his wedding team are usually singing and dancing. It is only in rare cases that the new husband is also counselled.

When I got married, I was in the USA. I skipped some of these rituals – not all of them. My husband's family had to go to meet my family and ask for the 'gourd of water'. My parents granted them the '*sego sa metsi*', then we could carry out the marriage and the celebra-

tion. When we got to the reception, the African-American men began to give my husband gifts with counselling messages. They gave him a rod, a weapon indicating that he must protect me, and a big triangular ruler, symbolizing his work as a mechanical engineer and that he must work and provide for his wife. No one had given me a gift of counselling regarding my role as a new wife. My South African friend noting this silence and gap, walked forward with her baskets, ladles and brooms, which she gave to me saying, 'you are a wife now. Here, take these baskets and use them to cook for your husband. Here is a broom. You must sweep and keep the home clean at all times'. I accepted. No symbol was given for my profession as a biblical scholar, perhaps by accident, but perhaps reflecting the gender expectations of men and women in marriage.

All of us can recall how gender roles have marked our lives from birth to the present. Gender roles are not only expressed as significant moments of our lives such as birth, menstruation, marriage; they pervade our daily lives so much so that sometimes we think they are natural. Many of us have not come to name gender roles as 'social constructions'. Rather, we regard them as natural. This is indeed understandable, for gender roles are intricately written into our names, in our clothes, in our facial expressions, in our demure aspect, in our languages, in our myths, stories, literature, history – virtually everything that surrounds us produces gender roles and underlines that this is how things are; this is how things should remain, this is our culture, this is the law and this is how God intended things to be. Sometimes, or many times, we do not know how to relate outside our ascribed gender roles. Gender constructions are a framework within which we have been socialized to make sense of our lives and relationships. Indeed, gender roles are played out in all aspects of our lives even to our graves. In the classical Setswana and other African cultures, a man was buried in his kraal, wrapped in the fresh skin of a cow and his weapons of war for protection. A woman was buried with pots and other utensils that a woman uses in the kitchen. Gender roles were thus presumed to continue even in heaven. God forbid!

But if both boys and girls are gendered what is the problem? Why are we problematizing gender relations in our societies, in our churches and seeking change? The problem with the gender constructions is that they empower men and disempower women. Power of leadership, property ownership and decision-making, are largely in the hands of men.

#### *Gender Imbalance in the Bible*

Clearly our biblical literature arose from the Jewish culture, which like most of our cultures, constructed gender from an androcentric perspec-



tive. The very story of Genesis reflects such powerful gender inequality with Eve being created from Adam and for Adam. Even sinning earns one a punishment that underlines one's gender role: Eve 'will desire her husband and he will rule over her; she will bear children in pain while the man will till the land and eat from the sweat of his brow'. The story defines her gender roles as a punishment sanctioned by God. But happily we may all agree that, according to this story, gender relations reflect brokenness, sin, separation from God, the fall. They hardly reflect God's initial intention for humanity, which is best captured in Gen. 1:27. The verse reads 'for God created them male and female, in God's image God created them...God blessed them both and gave both of them the responsibility for the earth' (Gen. 1.27-29). They were both created in God's image, they are both equal. If they were both given responsibility, then they were both given power of property. This reflects God's first intention for humanity. The second story primarily focuses on the fall. Gender construction, according to the popularly-known story of creation therefore, comes as a result of sin. They are inherently linked to the fall, hence it is important that we should note what Jesus Christ our redeemer did with the brokenness of our relationships.

Unfortunately, the bulk of biblical literature was written in the shadow of the fall, when relationships had been defined as unequal. Leadership in the biblical literature is mostly in the hands of men. The biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Ruth, Tamar, Bathsheba, are important in so far as they are mothers of sons, the inheritors of their fathers' names and power. In fact, in the biblical literature hardly any girl gets born; women just give birth to a line of sons. This sets in place a very disturbing pattern which sees women as important only when they are in unequal relation with men.

#### *Gender Inequality is Violence against Women*

While both women and men can be subjugated by violence, women are on the receiving end of violence. For many women, violence is not only something that happens to you on the street, but something that they live with under their own roof, at their own workplace and in their own church. This is primarily because gender inequalities, that are structurally embedded in all our relationships and social institutions, sanction violence against women. Examples are numerous. In the name of gender inequality, many millions of young African girls are subjugated to genital mutilation, many other millions of Chinese baby girls do not get to see the light of day. Many others are taught silence, obedience and denied the right to education as funds are only available for their brothers while they are trained to get married. Millions are taught to be ashamed of their bodies and trained not to exercise their intelligence

to make decisions about their lives. Many young girls, who have had no education are subjugated to girl trafficking where they serve as sex workers in richer countries against their own will. Some, faced with very few survival techniques, choose sex work in their own countries. Others who lose their virginity to sexual abuse, feel worthless and fear they cannot get married and thus turn to sex work.

In the name of gender inequalities, that we have normalized as culture and religion, women are instructed to cover their bodies completely for they can easily tempt men and pollute the social body. Their bodies are named as dangerous. Those who are raped or violated are made to bear the guilt as they are held responsible for their own victimization. Women are removed from the work place and confined to their homes, regardless of whether they are qualified professionals or not. By this denial of the right to work, most women are thus forcefully defined as dependent on men. As dependents, they are thus forced into submission and subservience in marriage. They dare not say, 'No' to their husbands, for then where will they live and what will they eat? Women, thus, virtually stay home to serve and treat their husband as their lords and masters. Some women are professionally trained, they work and earn salaries, but they still remain in abusive relationships because they have been taught to 'endure the marriage, to be long suffering to ensure that their marriages survive'. If they leave they feel guilty for failing to endure and maintain the marriage. Many women are thus victims of kitchen death and the so-called honour killings or a lifetime of abuse. Domestic violence is not an accident. It is a logical consequence of gender injustice. Similarly, working women are subjugated to sexual harassment, and some, because they have insufficient training or because they are begging to keep their jobs or to be promoted, give in to sexual abuse by their bosses.

Similarly, the masculinity that is at work, both in domestic violence and sexual harassment, is founded on patriarchal gender constructions. Men who have been constructed as leaders, decision makers, property owners are anxious to assert their positions. A wife who speaks back, and tends to have a mind of her own, violates the honour of her husband, who may rightfully seek to assert to his position and in anxiousness to prove his power may resort to physical, verbal or emotional abuse. In short, gender constructions socialize most men to see women as objects of their interest and desire, who must submit, serve and obey them. How this is effected by men takes many different forms, but violence is one of them.

Similarly, the sex industry, which largely employs women, whether by choice or not, is a crime of gender injustice. Because gender inequality denies women ownership of property and the space to develop

their skills, those who do not have husbands and fathers who can provide for them are forced to sell the only thing they can sell: namely sex. Sex work is, therefore, not a crime of a few individuals who lack morals. It is a crime of gender injustice that is built into our societies. Similarly, rape, which happens in the home, work place and church, is a violence that is often unleashed on women and it is a package of gender inequalities. Rape instils fear in women and controls their movements. Unfortunately, home is also not a haven. Rape happens there, too.

#### *Gender Inequality is a Disease*

According to African thinking, diseases are mainly caused by bad relationships (Dube 1999: 315-28). Thus an indigenous healer, when approached by a sick person, first seeks to find out if the ill person is in a good relationship with the people he or she co-exists with. These would be people in the family, in the neighbourhood and other social contacts, such as work. The healer uses a divination set to examine this condition.

If we take this thinking just a little bit further and apply it to our gender relationships, it becomes clear that most of our social relationships have been laid on unhealthy foundations, insofar as they have been based on 'gender inequality'. From the perspective of African thinking on health, we can say our relationships of gender inequality have set the foundation of our society's views on disease. Societies that are founded on gender inequality have planted a fertile ground for illness. In Botswana people have stereotypes about women and old women as people who like to say they are sick. People make fun of how an old woman can describe to you how ill she is; how she can say, 'My child, my body aches and aches, beginning with my left foot, to my knee, to my waist. The ache climbs up, hitting me across my back down to my right side hip and up to my neck'. Once I heard a boy call after a young teenage girl in the street. When she kept walking, refusing to respond, the boy said, 'Why are you proud, when you are just a bundle of disease?'

This stereotype speaks volumes, about gender relationships and their impact on women's health. Women are sick because they are in bad relationships in their families, churches and their societies. Women are sick because bad relationships have been defined and maintained through an intricate system as normal. Women are sick because they have no power, no voice, no property, no leadership rights, no money. Women are sick because they do not have enough food to eat. They have been defined as the poorest of the world due to gender inequalities.

### *Gender Injustice and HIV/AIDS*

In the past some could have disputed that gender inequality constitutes illness, but HIV/AIDS has been a rude awakening. This disease is ravaging millions, and it must and it will redefine how we do our mission in the coming years as a church. We are already confronted with the enormous challenges of ministering to the infected, the sick, the dying, the affected, the grieving, the isolated, the widows, the millions of orphans, that will roam the streets, homeless, poor, without guidance, without love, vulnerable to sexual abuse or sex work, hence prone to HIV/AIDS infection.

To date, 34.5 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide. Twenty four million of those are found in Sub-Saharan Africa followed by South and South East Asia with 5.6 million, Latin America with 1.3 million, East and Pacific 53,000, Western Europe 520,000.

South Africa, a country known for its gross crimes against humanity, has the highest number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, followed by India. Clearly, the highest rates are linked with injustice and poverty. Since gender oppression renders most women the worst victims of poverty, infection is the highest among women. Research and information documentation indicate that infection rates in women and female children is much higher than the rate of infection in men in Southern Africa and elsewhere. This is primarily because most women and girl children are powerless due to their culturally-ascribed gender roles.

It was on these grounds that last year's World AIDS day adopted the motto '*Men can make a difference*', in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The motto wanted to highlight that gender inequality, that renders women powerless is burying us in the grave of HIV/AIDS. Men's role was thus highlighted as an attempt to bring men to examine the construction of their masculinity, how it leads them to risky behaviour, how it leads them to violence on women, how it leads them to give women in their lives no say about their own bodies.

When I turned to *The Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, a book that was compiled in 1995, independent of HIV/AIDS concerns, I found that they defined healing as follows:

Healing is...liberation from patriarchal expectations and roles, abusive relationships, constricting stereotypes, and growth-stifling situations. Wholeness is...self-esteem, freedom of choice, creative and mutually fulfilling relationships, spiritual nurture and growth (Nancy Hadersty, 1996: 137).

In short, the feminist definition of healing or wholeness is the removal of gender injustice in our society.

### *Jesus the Liberator is the Healer of Gender Injustice*

Jesus the liberator came to a society that was structured along gender injustice. Women lacked power of leadership, of public influence; they were denied independent property ownership and many, who were not under either their fathers or husbands, had to turn to sex work. How did Jesus deal with the gender injustice embedded in his own culture?

### *Breaking the Chains of Motherhood*

In many societies women are relegated to motherhood. A woman's worth is measured by whether she is a mother. Infertile women are made to live with shame. Thus, many professionally-trained women can hardly develop their careers as they must attend to the demand of mothering. Motherhood is thus used to deny women the space to develop their profession and to confine them to their homes. By so doing, motherhood is one of the most effective tools that patriarchy uses to ensure that women remain dependent, poor and at home.

Jesus' attitude to motherhood is best illustrated by his relationship with his mother. In the Gospel of John, Mary opens and closes the ministry of Jesus. But she appears not as Jesus' mother, but as a member of the discipleship. In John 2 she tells Jesus that the people have no wine; Jesus responds saying, '*Woman* what has that to do with me? My hour has not yet come'. But through Mary's faith, Jesus performs his first miracle; she shows Jesus that his hour has come. Through this miracle, the text says, 'his disciples' believed in him. Note that it does not say other people, but those who were already followers believed in him. So the faith of Mary here benefits both Jesus and his disciples and brings them to realize their vocation more clearly. Mary also appears at the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is hanging on the cross and Mary, together with the beloved disciple, is standing there. Jesus looks at her, and says to her, '*Woman*, behold your child'; he looks at the beloved disciple and says, 'behold your mother'. The text tells us that 'from that hour the disciple took her into the disciple's own home' (Jn 19.25-27). In both stories, Jesus avoids calling Mary 'Mother' in relation to her biological role, but counts her as a member of the community of faith.

The new family that Jesus calls into being directly challenges the traditional one. Jesus thus said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword: For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Mt. 10.34-35, Lk. 12.53). The family of faith that Jesus calls into being challenges the foundations of the current family. Commitment to discipleship will demand that we abandon the accepted family structures.

### *Decision Making and Leadership in the Church*

In John's Gospel (1.35-51) the formula that is used for calling disciples is that Jesus would reveal himself to a person, and that person would leave whatever s/he is doing, run and find another person and say, 'come and see'. When Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.6-26) by the well, she says to him, 'We know that a Messiah will come', and Jesus reveals himself to her saying, 'I am' (v. 26). When the woman hears this great news she leaves her water-pot behind. She runs to the village and virtually proclaims in the streets that people should come and see a Messiah. They come, they see, they hear and they believe in Jesus (v. 42). The Samaritan woman thus becomes the first evangelist, prior to the commissioning of the twelve. It is only when she has gone to the village that Jesus shows his male disciples that the fields are white and ready to harvest (v. 35). This talk to the male disciples is followed by the arrival of the Samaritan woman with people from the village. Just like Mary, the Samaritan woman is thus a model to the male disciples. She shows male disciples that they must carry out missionary work.

By revealing himself to the Samaritan woman, by her response and the impact of her preaching, Jesus gave women voice and the right to preach. We realize in this story the dramatic impact on gender relations when Jesus comes onto the scene: when Jesus reveals himself to women, 'they leave their water-pots behind'. They are freed from their gender roles of being a *Morwadi*, one who carries, to being a *Moreri*, one who carries the good news: to being the preacher to the world. Women begin to speak.

While some may say, 'Yes, but she was not sent'. Yes, indeed, she was not commissioned, rather she decided on her own to carry the Gospel to the village. It is important that women should be able to make their own decisions and to act on them. But for those who say what is authoritative is 'commission' or being sent, I would like to point you to Mary Magdalene at the resurrection scene (John 20). She goes searching for Jesus and stands crying because she cannot find his body. Jesus comes to her and says, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' Then Jesus reveals himself to her and sends her to preach the first good news to the disciples, saying 'Go to my sisters and brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my God and your God'. The text confirms to us that she acted upon the word of Jesus. It says, 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples saying, 'I have seen the Lord'. And she told them that Jesus had said these things to her (20.17-18). These two stories give us two models of breaking gender stereotypes. First, the model

of breaking gender injustice by allowing women to make their own decisions and to act on them (Samaritan woman). Second, the model of breaking gender injustice by sending women, that is commissioning or institutionally authorizing them to assume positions of leadership (Mary Magdalene).

*Jesus and the Worst Victims of patriarchy: Sex Workers and Widows*

Sex workers were many in Jesus' day. These were women who for one reason or another found themselves outside their father and husband's protection. Because women were unlikely to hold professions nor did they inherit property, they had no other choice but to make a living by selling sex. In most societies, we shun sex workers. We are judgemental, saying they lack morals, they are without any conscience, they are unclean. It was the same in Jesus' society. But all this is pretentious, for sex workers are the product of our own social systems. Further, they serve normal and respectable men of our society. One excellent example is that of Judah and Tamar. Judah saw his daughter-in-law disguised as a sex worker; he helped himself and she fell pregnant. When she was found pregnant, Judah, presenting himself as a guardian of high sexual morals, instructed that she should be stoned for her sexual immorality. When Tamar revealed that she had been impregnated by her father-in-law, it was no longer a sin worth stoning. She was saved. Here we realize the sins of gender injustice: the law itself is not gender neutral.

Jesus knew this structurally sanctioned injustice and took a different path towards sex workers. One day Jesus was having dinner in the house of a Pharisee, when one of the sex workers came in. She knelt by the feet of Jesus and started washing them with her tears, drying them with her hair, anointing them with oil. Then she started kissing Jesus' feet at length. Jesus did not stop her. Some people were murmuring inwardly, 'If this man was a prophet he would know what kind of a woman is this'. Jesus knew, but he knew better. He knew that her sins were many and that they were the sins of the society. Her sins were the sins of gender injustice, which is embedded in our cultures, religions and laws. So instead of castigating her, he castigated the law keeper – the Pharisee, for the law and the lawyers themselves were unjust.

Because of gender injustice, widows were another group of women who could easily become victims of poverty. In the Hebrew Bible their vulnerability is highlighted. Prophets castigate those in power for exploiting widows. The worst thing that could happen to a widow was if there was no son to be the inheritor of the husband's property. In such situations relations of the husband could take the property or

marry the widow to keep property in the family. The case of Ruth and Naomi illustrate this desperation. These two widows had to engage Boaz to redeem themselves and to be reconciled to the property of their husbands (Ruth 3-4). Jesus' perspective towards widows, widely featured in Luke's Gospel, (Lk. 18.3) is best illustrated by the story of the widow and the unjust judge. The widow who persistently followed the judge asking to be granted 'justice' was most probably disinherited from her property by a relative to her husband, who may have refused to marry her, thus leaving her destitute. In this story Jesus emphasizes that widows must not wait a day before needs are attended to. Justice must be granted to them today, for God listens and grants them their request.

#### *Jesus has Healed Us*

From these examples it is clear that Jesus came to a world of gender imbalance, a world that sentenced many women to violence and to the disease of gender injustice. However, he undertook to announce liberation, to undermine gender inequality and to begin charting the path of gender justice. He sent women to preach, giving them public leadership roles: it causes them to leave their water-pots behind and to proclaim the word in public.

#### *Christ, you are the one who empowers us*

Empowerment...means the process by which individuals, families, groups and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic, and political strength and influence in order to improve their well-being. 'Empowerment is not granted from an external source but emerges from within as persons and communities acknowledge and appreciate their gifts and their responsibility... Hence empowerment is a transforming process that enhances the moral agency of women and other oppressed groups and enables them to act toward justice and right relations (Giblin 1996: 83-84).

#### *Gender, Power Distributions and Use*

There is a link between power and gender. As we have already seen, the problem with gender construction is that it does not distribute power evenly to women and men. Gender constructions are done from an androcentric perspective—empowering men. On the basis of gender constructions, women are denied economic, political, intellectual and social power. Most women are not necessarily denied physical power, although many times they are constructed as weak. In the spiritual arena, we find most women, for they are hardly denied the right to a relationship with the Divine. But even here, women are denied spiritual leadership. Further, spirituality is often used to legitimate the



denial of power to women in the society. Similarly, institutional power is also distributed along the lines of gender; that is, family, church and government's economic, political and intellectual power is often in the hands of men.

If power is better given to both men and women what are the criteria for having access to power? Gender has and still is an outstanding criteria for distributing power, but we are already problematizing it and seeking just ways of allocating power. In many instances, we can overcome some of the gender constraints to empower both women and men, by education, which gives economic power, intellectual power, social power and a degree of vying for political in such institutions as the family, church and community. So, if we are men and women in mission who want to start chipping away at the gender barriers of power, one of the things we really need to embark upon is to train or educate our women to understand and overcome the gender barriers that distance them from power. Yet I want to add that the type and level of education that we give to our women also matters.

We can commit ourselves to ensuring that our liturgy affirms both women and men. One of the things that I find quite distressing is how male preachers give very sexist images of women in their sermons. Women appear as the seducers, the tempters, the victims who are responsible for their own abuse. During wedding ceremonies, many male preachers continue to use the story of the fall—that is, Eve as having been created from and for Adam and as having been punished by being subjugated to Adam. We need to focus our wedding sermons on the Gen. 1.27-28 creation story, to emphasize that both men and women were created in God's image. Both were blessed. Both were given material and leadership power over the earth. One of the things that still dramatically underline gender inequality are the wedding vows. I have found that many churches in Botswana still use the traditional vows, where a man takes or marries a woman but he virtually remains unmarried.

But how did Jesus empower men and women? How did he overcome gender barriers? We shall examine Jesus' approach to empowerment by examining two stories. The story of the bleeding woman and of Jairus' daughter in Mk. 5.23-43.

*The Bleeding Woman and Talitha Cum*  
(Mt. 9.18-26, Mk. 5.22-43, Lk. 9.41-56)

Both these stories are familiar to you and so let us note the distribution of power of all the characters that appear in the story. Their powers will be attested to by the positions they hold, what they do and what people say

or do to them; and whether they are named or not. As compared with the unnamed women, the men in the story are named as Jairus, Jesus, John, James and Peter. Unlike the women in the story, they hold social positions such as leader of the synagogue, teacher/healer, prophet, disciples. Unlike the women, who either never speak or have their words quoted, the men in the story speak out their words and are quoted.

The gender divide and the power distributions that accompany the story is vividly dramatized by the presentation of the bleeding woman and Jairus' approach to Jesus. They both need healing from Jesus. Jairus, as a man who is allowed to speak in public, comes straight to Jesus, falls before him and verbally pleads with him to come and heal his child. The woman, on the other hand, comes behind Jesus. She does not come straight to Jesus and tell him what she needs; rather she silently decides that if she touches Jesus she will be healed. She decides to grab the power of healing from Jesus without asking. Her very approach from behind is a gender construction; and so is her capacity to verbally articulate her need.

But further, her illness of bleeding marked her as unclean, especially around the teachers. She lacks economic, political, physical and social power. She is locked in poverty, social marginalization and physical ailment. But if there is anything she needs then it is healing. Perhaps a good woman should not be speaking in public – or should she?

The response of Jesus is instructive in this model of self-empowerment. That is when the powerless have taken power from the powerful, the powerful know, they are shaken. They can investigate and they can, if they wish, punish those who are taking the power from them. Hence, the woman is trembling when she confesses what she has done. Jesus, however, welcomes her action, congratulating her for her faith: 'your faith has healed you'. Jesus credits her for spiritual power. In this approval, Jesus is saying the powerless have the right to power. The powerless must seek out this power, they must get it, for they need it. Further, those who have power in their hands should be prepared to feel power leaving their garments. They should be prepared to share this power.

The powerless should and must rise to become the architects of their liberation. It is on these grounds that Marie GIBLIN argues that,

Empowerment... means the process by which individuals, families, groups and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic and political strength and influence in order to improve their well-being. Empowerment is not granted from an external source but emerges from within as persons and communities acknowledge and appreciate their gifts and their responsibility... Hence empowerment is a transforming process that enhances the moral agency of women and other oppressed groups and enables them to act toward justice and right relations (83-84).

### *Christ, You Are the One Who Sends Us*

Jesus ascended to heaven and handed over to us, the church, the ministry of Jesus, charging us with the role of replicating the liberating gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Have we maintained the liberating gospel of Jesus or has the church backslid to oppressive relationships? The fact that we are here, trying to rediscover God's will for our relationships as men and women, suggests that somehow and somewhere, something certainly did go wrong.

### *But Why?*

The liberating gospel of Christ demands commitment and lives to be laid down. The early church which had preached a radical message of freedom had done a major attack on the Greco-Roman household codes. They broke its hierarchy and replaced it with equality. Their gospel redistributed power, from the hands of the master/husband/father into the hands of all. All flesh was now empowered to speak and economic power was in the hands of all. Spiritual power, similarly, was no longer an exclusive right of few. Slaves were free hence Philemon exercised his freedom, by deserting his master. Women were free and felt they did not have to get married, for they wanted to serve Christ better (1 Cor. 7.32-35); and as Paul had told them marriage is oppressive and constraining (1 Cor. 7.28-35) it seems many women chose to remain single and to move around preaching (1 Tim. 5.9-15). This must certainly have been disturbing for there was now a breed of women and slaves who insisted on and exercised their freedom. They were not under any household authority, but under the Christian family. But because for the Roman Empire family order was state order, this new Christian ethic translated into violation of state law. It would seem the early church was heavily criticized, held to be lawless perhaps even persecuted (1 Pet. 3.13-18), for disrupting public order (1 Tim. 6.1-2). In response, the church decided that they should be a law-abiding church, by fully adopting the household codes as Christian codes. In this process the gospel of Christ was not allowed to liberate our relationships and to ground them on justice. Rather, we came full circle and embraced gender inequality. Worse, we christianized patriarchy, giving it more legitimacy than before, for it was no longer just a worldly arrangement; rather it reflected how things are in heaven and God's will. The relationships of patriarchy were likened to the relationship of Jesus and the church which was now in fact described in terms of these codes.

Texts that indicate that the church acted out of responses to the public fear which explicitly stated in 1 Pet. 2.11, which reads:

Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that though they malign you as evildoers they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the sake of God accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or governors sent by the emperor... As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone...Fear God, Honour the emperor.

Here concern for Gentiles is in the foreground. It is also clear that the church has also been accused as evildoers. Their response is to accept the Roman empirical standards. In this advice the church, unlike its founder, will not challenge the empire, but obey and live peacefully as members of the Roman Empire.

*Starting Over Again: Go Preach the Liberating Gospel of Christ*

Now, let me leave the backslidden church and return to us, the Community of Women and Men in mission. We need to answer the question that Christ put to us saying 'Who do you say that I am?', by saying, 'You are the Christ, the one who empowers and sends women and men to go and preach the liberating gospel of Christ'.

It is an exciting thing to rush to the villages and cities and pronounce 'Jesus is the Christ, the liberator, the healer, the one who empowers us and the one who sends us as men and women'. But the ethics of this gospel demands a complete revolution of the very cultures, laws, beliefs and structures that we stand on in our churches, families and societies. Moreover, it does not help when we have a backslidden church right in the New Testament, for those who resist the message of liberation can point to Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Peter and 1 Timothy and say 'It is written. It is the word of God'. But Christ has no room for scriptures that are used to suppress women and men from living out their freedom in Christ. So, it is well and good that it is written that women must be silent in church but I say to you the Gospel of Christ the liberator sets us free, his Spirit of fire lights us all and gives both men and women the power to speak. I therefore send you to your churches, your families, your villages, towns, cities and countries to proclaim that Christ sends women and men. Christ heals women and men. Christ empowers men and women. I send you to replicate the ministry of Jesus. I send you to die proclaiming the liberating gospel of Christ, for there is no alternative – the alternative is violence, disease and death. My parting word is 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Go and prophesy'.

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, Denise M.  
 1996 'Power', in *A Dictionary of Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), pp. 219-21.
- Collins, Sheila D.  
 1996 'Domination', in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), pp. 71-72.
- Dibeela, Prince M.  
 2000 *What does the Lord Require of Us* (Nottingham: United Reformed Church East Midlands).
- Dube, Musa W.  
 2000 'Divining Texts for International Relations', in Ingrid Kitzinger (ed.), *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Reviewed* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), pp. 315-28.  
 1999 'Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24-43', in *The Ecumenical Review* 51/1.  
 2001 'Healing Where there is No Healing; Reading Miracles in an HIV/AIDS Context', in G. Phillips and N. Wilkinson (eds.), *Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte* (New York: Trinity Press).  
 2001 'Little Girl, Get Up: An Introduction', in *Talitha-cum: Theologies of African Women* (Natal: Cluster Publications).  
 2000 *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press).  
 1997 'Praying the Lord's Prayer in the Global Economic Era (Mt. 6:9-13)', *The Ecumenical Review* 49/4 (October).  
 2001 'Preaching to the Converted: Unsettling the Christian Church', A paper read at Southern African Regional Consultation on HIV/AIDS: Together We can Make a Difference, Johannesburg, March 26-29.
- Dube, Musa W. (ed.)  
 2001 *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL).
- Fabella, Virginia, and R.S. Sugirtharajah (eds.)  
 2000 *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).
- Giblin, Marie, J.  
 1996 'Empowerment', in *Dictionary of Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), pp. 83-84.
- Hardesty, Nancy A.  
 1996 'Healing', in Letty Russell, and J. Shannon Clarkson (eds.), *Dictionary of Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press).
- Kanyoro, Musimbi  
 1995 'Cultural Hermeneutics', in Ofelia Ortega (ed.), *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Geneva: WCC), pp.18-28.
- Masenya, Madipoane  
 1997 'Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women', *Semeia* 78, pp. 55-68.
- Nyambura, Njoroge, and Musa W. Dube (eds.)  
 2001 *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women* (Natal: Cluster Publications).
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba  
 1995 *Daughters of Anova: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).

- Rebera, Ranjini  
 1997 'Polarity or Partnership? Retelling the story of Martha and Mary from Asian Women Perspective (Luke 10:38-42)', *Semeia* 78.
- Russell, Letty M., and J. Shannon Clarkson  
 2000 *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).
- Santa Ana, Julio  
 1998 *Sustainability and Globalization* (Geneva: WCC).
- Schaberg, J.  
 1992 'Luke', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press).
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E.  
 1983 *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad).  
 1984 *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., and Mary Shawn Copeland (eds.)  
 1994/1 *Violence Against Women* (Concilium; London: SCM Press).
- Staugard, Frantz  
 1985 *Traditional Healers: Medicine in Botswana* (Gaborone: Ipelegeng Publishers).
- Theissen, Gerd  
 1977 *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).
- Thurston, Bonnie  
 1998 *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad).
- Turner Donovan, Mary, and Mary Lin Hudson  
 1999 *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voices in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press).
- Weems, Renita  
 1993 *I Asked For Intimacy: Stories of Blessings, Betrays and Birthings* (San Diego: LuraMedia).
- Welborn, Alice  
 1998 *Stepping Stones: A training Package on HIV/AIDS, Communication and Relationship Skills* (London: ACTIONAID).
- West, Cornel  
 1993 *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon :Press).
- WCC, *A Guide to HIV/AIDS Pastoral Counseling* (Geneva: WCC, 1990).  
 1997 *Facing AIDS: The Challenge, The Churches' Response* (Geneva, WCC).  
 1999 *Facing AIDS: Education in the Context of Vulnerability HIV/AIDS* (Geneva: WCC).



