

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

Prepared by the Florida Council
of Catholic Women

Mary, Mother of Jesus

Mary was a girl from an obscure country town buried in the hills. She was young, poor and of the despised Jewish race.

We wonder why God chose such a woman to be the mother of His Son.

We know very little of her childhood except that she was the daughter of Joachim and Anne. At an early age she was engaged to St. Joseph and although she was a virgin she became pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1: 20 - 21
Luke 1: 30 - 32, 1: 35

When Mary heard that her cousin Elizabeth was to have a child, she went "in great haste" to help her.

Luke 1: 41 - 43

Elizabeth greeted Mary with joy and cried out "*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*"

Mary answered her with one of our most treasured prayers.

The Magnificat

*"Mary said:
'My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
And my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior,
For you have looked with favor
upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed.
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me,*

*And holy is your Name.
Your mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear you.
You have shown strength with your arm,
you have scattered the proud in their conceit,
you have disposed the might from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
while you have sent the rich away empty.
You have come to the aid of Israel, your servant,
mindful of your mercy
the promise you made to our ancestors
to Sarah and Abraham
and their descendants forever.'"*

Luke 1: 46 - 55, The Inclusive New Testament.

Mary lived with poverty and sorrow. She was always poor. She had her baby in a cave. She lost her husband while she was still very young and then soon afterwards her son left to begin his public life. She was with him in Cana. She watched him die. She stood at the foot of the cross, a woman of blind faith and trust. How comforted she must have been to see him and hear him say

"I am risen, I am still with you."

How fulfilled she must have felt forty days later to witness his Ascension.

Reflections:

Reflect on how Mary can teach us in all our problems as wives, mothers and widows.

Consider her as a symbol of trust and confidence in God. Ask for her help often. She understands ridicule, poverty, worry and broken hearts.

Mary didn't hesitate to say "Yes" to God. Do we? Do we push aside opportunities to be useful because we "aren't ready right now?" Mary was always ready.

Priscilla

(*Prisca*)

Priscilla (or Prisca as she is mentioned in the bible) is referred to in the following scripture readings:

Romans 16: 3 - 5

Acts 18: 19; Acts 18: 24 - 28

2 Timothy 4: 19

1 Corinthians 16: 19

Many of the Jews who were expelled from Rome settled in Corinth and so Corinth became a city of many cultures and beliefs. Those who migrated to Corinth brought with them all their wives, virtues and disagreements. Priscilla and her husband Aquila were among those Jews who were expelled. They had known Paul and quickly joined in his ministry.

At that time (56 c.e.) women were regarded as equals so that Priscilla and Aquila acted as a team. Priscilla's name is mentioned more often than her husband's so it is believed she was the more prominent one.

Their work was a model for team ministry and community building, as we know it today.

The Church of groups of people would gather in their homes to listen to Paul. Paul said

"Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life."

By the many references in Scripture, we can see that they were well known for their fearless missionary work and stand as an example today for those who are willing to "risk their necks."

Reflections"

How far are we willing to go to defend our faith?

Do we sit back and watch when we could be a participant?

Can we work well with others accepting advice or accepting a less prominent part?

Can we keep our eyes on the goal and not the gold?

Sarah

The first matriarch of Israel is Sarah. Her story is found in Genesis, Chapters 12-18. Sarah was a very beautiful woman who married Abraham. During a time of great famine, Sarah and Abraham traveled to Egypt where Abraham told the Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister. The Egyptians took Sarah into the Pharaoh's house. Abraham received sheep, oxen, donkeys and slaves in exchange for Sarah whom the Pharaoh took as his wife. God saved Sarah by inflicting plagues upon the Pharaoh and his house. When the Pharaoh realized the truth that he had committed adultery, he confronted Abraham and returned his wife Sarah to him.

In the Hebrew culture, barrenness was one of the greatest afflictions. Sarah was barren until she was ninety years old. Unable to conceive, Sarah gave her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to Abraham as a surrogate mother. Hagar bore a son, Ishmael. After that Sarah abused Hagar because Hagar looked at her with contempt.

In Genesis, Chapter 17, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child. Abraham laughs and asks God how a hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman can have a baby? God answers....

"Your wife Sarah shall bear a son and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I will bless him and make him a great nation."

Chapter 17: 17 - 20

When Sarah overhears this conversation, she laughs saying - I am old and my husband is old. How can this be? Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age.

DISCUSSION STARTER

1. What can we learn from Sarah? One lesson is that nothing is impossible for God. We must wait patiently for his time, not ours.
2. Sarah waited and prayed for a child for almost ninety years. Are we that patient? If you found that you were pregnant at ninety years of age, what would your reaction be? Would you have enough trust in God to willingly accept his word?

PRAYER EXPERIENCE

God has many blessings awaiting us. Listen to him! Listen to him! Be aware of His love and tenderness.

Martha

Martha, her sister Mary and brother Lazarus, lived in Bethany, a small town at the foot of the Mount of Olives.

Martha was the older sister who probably owned the house. It is believed that the family produced olive oil as a means of their livelihood.

The town was situated at cross roads where roads to Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem and Gethsemane converged.

Because Jesus' travels took him through Bethany, he often stayed with the family. He was comfortable with them and loved them dearly. He disregarded the rules that did not permit women to eat with men, but rather enjoyed their company.

John 11: 1 - 45

12: 1 - 8

Luke 10: 38 - 42

John writes of the death of Lazarus. He tells that Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus telling him that his brother was sick. When Jesus received the message, he continued his work. When he was asked why he didn't go back, he replied

"This sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God that the Son of God may be glorified in it."

After two days he returned. "Martha therefore, as soon as she heard that Jesus had come, went to meet him but Mary sat at home."

We can see the contrast between the two women.

Martha took the first step of faith by leaving the home where the guests had gathered after the funeral. She doesn't stay home mourning but takes action and confronts Jesus

"If you had been here my brother would never have died."

John depicts Martha as confident, assertive and capable.

Luke sees Martha as upset and angry because the task of preparing a banquet had fallen on her shoulders while Mary sat and visited with the guests.

"My sister has left me to serve alone. Speak to her."

Luke describes Jesus' reply as a reprimand, but can't we read into it a tone of gentleness and love as he says

"Martha, Martha, Thou art careful, and art troubled about many things."

These Gospels give us two different Marthas; a strong, capable woman who confronts Jesus and a busy, frustrated hard worker concerned with details.

Can't we choose both Marthas? Perhaps we need a blending of the two Marthas in our lives to make us more balanced.

Martha should always be remembered for her perfect act of Faith

John 11: 23 - 27

"I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, God's only Begotten, the One who is coming into the world."

Reflections:

The Gospel of Luke and John describe Martha differently.

Which Martha do you identify with?

A grieving Martha meets Jesus and says: *"If you only had been here."*

Have you often experienced similar thoughts when you had a loss?

Do you sometimes feel that all of the load is on your shoulders?

How did Jesus speak to Martha about this?

Would he say the same to us?

Can we balance our lives so the two "Marthas" can live within us and among us?

Phoebe

Shortly after his election as Pope, John Paul n visited the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva and standing near the high altar, which contains the remains of St. Catherine of Siena, spoke of "how deeply the mission of women is inscribed in the mystery of the Church". First and foremost is Mary, the mother of Our Lord the Gospels tell us, as well of other women who accompanied Jesus and his Apostles from Galilee to Jerusalem and devoted themselves to his mission.

Among those mentioned as assisting the missionary efforts of St. Paul is Phoebe, a Christian woman in the service of the Church of Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. Phoebe, in the opinion of such Scripture scholars as Fr. Brendon Byrne,S.J., was entrusted by St. Paul to bring his letter to the Romans, a work judged to have a great influence on the later Christian theological development. Little is known about Phoebe. We do not know how, when, or where she and St. Pam first met. It is clear that St. Paul held her in high esteem. In his letter of introduction, St Paul refers to her as "our sister who is also a deacon in the Church of Cenchreae." While one must be careful not to confuse the title deacon with the office of diaconate in the Church today, and avoid altogether translating it as deaconess, for such would be totally misleading, there is no question that Phoebe was a person of stature within the Church of Cenchreae and that she exercised a ministry of service.

Phoebe is but one of a countless number of women, whom the Holy Father reminds us have in the past and continue today, who share in the mission of the Church.

Reflections:

"I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is (also) a minister* of the Church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner of the Holy Ones and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well"

*Minister: in Greek "diakonos"

Discussion Starter:

1. Compare the time in which Phoebe lived with our own today. What do we have in common? How do we differ?
2. Phoebe was generous and confident. How would these characteristics affect our Church ministries today?
3. Can Phoebe be a model for women in the church today? Can she be a model for you?

Prayer Experience:

1. Reflect on how you are a reflection of God's unconditional love.
2. Think about the leadership skills you share with others and others share with you. Create a prayer of thanksgiving for these gifts.

The Woman at the Well

John 4: 5 - 42

As Jesus was resting at Jacob's well, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. As she approached, Jesus said to her

"Give me a drink."

She was startled, looked at him and said

"You are a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?"

The woman did not speak with anger but with surprise because the Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans.

Jesus replied

"If you only recognized God's gift and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you the living water."

While much of the reading has a great deal to say about water it is important to realize that the discussion in this reading has a much deeper meaning.

In reading the passage we can see how the woman is coming to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus tells her

"Go call your husband and then come back."

She replied

"I have no husband."

Do you sense the humor Jesus displays when he answers her

"You are right in saying you have no husband. The fact is you've had five and the man you're living with is not your husband."

The woman ran off astonished and cried

"Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did. Could this not be the Messiah?"

Because of their encounter, many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus and begged him to stay.

Reflections:

Why did Jesus choose a Samaritan to receive the gift of Faith?

Can we see that Jesus had a way of choosing unlikely messengers?

Can he be asking one of us?

Are we listening or are we saying, "I'm not ready yet"?

Do we say, "Yes, God, but not now"?

Remember, God doesn't choose the perfect.... He perfects the chosen.

Prayer

God, help me to see myself as you see me. Let me recognize the times I've said thy will be done and then gave you what I wanted, not what you wanted. Help me to follow you all the way, not just as far as I want to go.

Tabitha

Acts 9: 36 - 43

Tabitha was a little known woman who lived in Jappa.

Her whole life was occupied with doing good works and almsgiving. She had been greatly concerned with the lives of widows, and spent time and money in supplying them with cloaks and tunics.

When Tabitha became ill and died the disciples sent for Peter who was in nearby Lydda.

Upon his arrival the widows came to him crying and showing him what Tabitha had done for them.

Peter entered the room alone and knelt and prayed. Then he turned to her body and said

"Tabitha, rise up."

Tabitha opened her eyes, saw Peter, and rose.

The news quickly spread throughout Jappa and, as a result, Peter stayed in the town a long time.

Reflections:

Is volunteering something you do only if it pleases you?

Do we always acknowledge the women who take on the menial tasks?

Sorting, washing, packing clothes

Cooking, serving, washing dishes

Rolling bandages, making rosaries

Driving others to doctors, Church, stores, meetings

Prayers

Lord, let me use my time and my talents to be of help to others. Let me remember that You are the Lord of the whole universe and can use anyone to accomplish Your work.

Let me remember that the service of Tabitha was not prompted by mere passing emotions of sympathy, but was an ongoing, everyday part of her life.

Ruth

Ruth 1: 8 - 18

Because a great famine fell upon the land, Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons left Bethlehem and settled in Moab. Shortly after their arrival, Naomi's husband died. She remained with her sons who had married women of Moab and who continued to care for her.

The family lived there about ten years when both of Naomi's sons died. Naomi had now lost her husband her sons. When they heard the news that Bethlehem no longer suffered with famine, she decided to return to her native land. Since Ruth and Orpha, her daughters-in-law, did not have children, they decided to go with her, but Naomi implored them to return to their mothers.

Orpha kissed her mother-in-law and returned.

Ruth stuck close to her mother-in-law. Ruth's action of journeying to Bethlehem with Naomi meant giving up her home and her own gods to embrace the God of Israel.

Ruth is always remembered for her unselfish reply to Naomi.

"Whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God."

Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest.

"Ruth went into the fields to glean the ears of corn that escaped the hands of the reapers."

The story of how Ruth met Boaz, the owner of the field and eventually married him is related.

Ruth2: 3 - 4

Ruth is an example of true and loving compassion by putting the needs of others before her own needs.

Reflection

Are we ever faced with hard choices that requires us to put our desires aside?

How do we face these demands?

Do we have aging parents or other family members who need us?

How do we respond?

Do we wait until they ask for help or do we remember Ruth and anticipate their needs?

Prayer

O Lord, give take on any responsibility that comes with the knowledge that it may not be easy, but with your help it will not be impossible.

Susanna

Daniel 13: 1 - 64

Susanna, a beautiful young girl, was married to Joakim, a rich and respected man. Their home in Babylon was surrounded by spacious gardens and was often visited by Jewish elders who had been appointed judges.

When two of the judges, upon seeing Susanna in the garden and tried to seduce her, she resisted their efforts and cried

"I am completely trapped. If I yield it will be my death, if I refuse I cannot escape your power. Yet it is better for me to fall into your power without guilt than into sin before God."

The servants heard her cries and rushed to the gardens only to hear the judges accuse her of adultery. Because they were judges, their words were accepted without question and Susanna was condemned to death.

As Susanna was being led to her death, a young man named Daniel cried out

"I will have no part in the death of this woman. Are you such fools to condemn a woman of Israel without examination and clear evidence?"

Daniel questioned each judge separately concerning the tree they had seen her under. Their answers proved their guilt. One replied the mastic and the other the mighty oak. The contrast between the mastic tree, which is small, and the mighty oak draws attention to the contradictions in their statements.

Susanna's complete trust in God is an inspiring lesson for us. She was willing to suffer anything rather than sin.

Reflections

Are we quick to judge and find fault?

Have we ever falsely accused someone with little effort to discover the truth?

Do we go along with the crowd because "everyone says so?"

Is our trust in God strong enough to resist the easy road?

Prayer

O Lord, give me the courage to resist listening to gossip and rumors. Let me remember that what I say should pass through three doors. It is true? Is it kind? It is necessary?

