

MARY COTES

# WOMEN WITHOUT WALLS

HOW GOD SHAPES ORDINARY WOMEN  
FOR EXTRAORDINARY KINGDOM WORK

GRACEW[]RK[S

*Women Without Walls*

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*This book is for Lifesprings International,  
encouraging, preparing and connecting women worldwide  
to impact their communities with the love of God,  
for the bilingual school of ministry—Formation Zoé—  
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*The words of the Lord are like the yeast  
when it first gets to work in the dough of our lives,  
making it rise with a new way of life.*

Madeleine Delbr el

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# THE KINGDOM ANNOUNCED



This is a book about the many ways in which God calls women to be ambassadors of his Kingdom. How does God prepare women to change the world around them? How can they be active players in the world as Christian disciples, to build communities shaped by the love, justice and peace that are so central to God's purposes? These are the pressing questions that lie at the heart of what follows.

This is not a book about how women can become good Christian wives and mothers. It offers no special advice on how to bring up children or grandchildren, or how to be devoted in marriage. Down the years there have been many wise and expert authors who have written on these subjects. However, this author is not adding her name to the list! Instead, the starting point of what is written here is the profound conviction that the Gospels present women not principally as wives and mothers and grandmothers, but ultimately as passionate followers of Christ. They are called to be faithful to the values of the Kingdom of God in every aspect of their daily lives.

## **The Kingdoms of this World and the Kingdom of God**

The inspiration for this book goes back to the morning of 15 July 2016, when I received an email from a French friend whose daughter lives in Nice. The previous evening, a devastating terrorist attack had taken place in the city and my friend's young granddaughter had thought that she had heard one of her school friends named amongst those dead. An icy

fear rose inside me. Yet another terrible event. In the months before, there had been terrorist attacks in Charleston, Paris and Brussels. Then in June, Jo Cox, one of our British MPs, had been murdered just a few days before the 'Brexit' vote. Since the day of that referendum, our Polish friends who live on the other side of the city had been spat upon as they got on a bus. One of our French church members had been insulted by his British colleagues on his arrival at work. An Italian neighbour had been punched by a man she had politely greeted on arrival at the gym. A strange and pernicious force seemed to have been let loose and everything seemed to be veering out of control. What was becoming of us? I was overwhelmed by a crushing sense of apprehension, not just for my own nation and our social and political relationships, but for the stability of the whole world currently so torn by fear and hatred, poverty and war.

I was sitting at my desk and began to leaf through the pages of the Gospels. I was both comforted and challenged to discover once again that Jesus also lived in a world that was poisoned by political turmoil and racial tension. Fear dominated everyday life. The Roman occupation of Palestine had been in existence for some hundred years and there seemed to be no end to it in sight. Far from bringing the promised peace of the 'pax romana', the occupation brought the threat of violence that could explode at any moment. The Roman army was present everywhere; behind every centurion who appears in the Gospels there were a hundred Roman soldiers. This Roman 'kingdom' exercised an iron grip on the population and imposed a crippling system of unjust and exorbitant taxation. Those who refused to pay and those who were unable to do so were heavily punished, tortured or put to death. Crucifixion, the death penalty imposed by the Romans, was intended to serve as a discouragement to trouble-makers.

This state of affairs provoked different reactions amongst



different groups. Certain Jews—of which Herod was one—collaborated with Roman power and lined their pockets at the same time. Other Jews looked back with a great sense of nostalgia to King David’s empire and longed for the day when the power of the Roman occupation would be overthrown and a national ‘kingdom’ put in its place. Some plotted violent revolution.

Meanwhile, the empire attracted a large number of immigrant traders who lived in the non-Jewish areas of the region. Certain pious Jews were more fearful than ever that the number and influence of non-Jews in the area would destroy the integrity of the Jewish nation before God. Far from wanting to collaborate with the Romans, they dreamed of a different ‘kingdom’ built upon the religious and cultural purity of their people. They encouraged Jews to live separately from Gentiles and maintain the religious and cultural practices that defined their Jewish identity.

And the people in the middle found themselves the victims of distrust. If they hated the Romans for inflicting a military occupation, they also despised them for being Gentiles. The mistrust they felt in relation to the Romans poisoned their everyday relationships with their fellows. Who was a collaborator? Who belonged to the resistance? Who would exploit them and make money at their expense? In such a social climate, it was entirely understandable that anger, despair and hatred should seep into the minds and hearts of all the people. The whole of society was imbued by an atmosphere of toxic values that could quickly and effortlessly eradicate faith, hope and love.

As I reread the pages of the Gospel that morning of 15 July, I felt as if I was hearing the teaching of Jesus in a new way. In the midst of a scary, divided world not too different from our own, Jesus invites his followers to seek another Kingdom. Turning to his followers who are as tired of present realities

as they are fearful for the future, he calls them to reject the pernicious values with which they are surrounded. Instead of recommending that they give vent to anger and distrust, or seek the expulsion of any and all who do not resemble them, Jesus calls them to, "...seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33a, ESV).

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is central to Jesus' ministry. He announces it right from the very moment when, at the start of the Gospel story, he comes into Galilee and calls his listeners, men and women alike, to seek a dramatic change in their lives: Repent! Be converted! Jesus speaks of a categorical change of orientation. Stop, turn around, and go in the opposite direction. He is not recommending a superficial lifestyle change or the violent replacement of one military power by another. Nor is he advocating the practice of a private, self-absorbed spirituality. Rather, he is pointing to a profound transformation that will begin within each one and *overflow into the whole of society*.

What an extraordinary invitation! If the disciples of Jesus have the impression that nothing can possibly change for the better, Jesus points to a new reality: the possibility of living according to God's values. All those who follow Jesus have the chance to leave behind a life lived according to the values of their contemporary context, and live according to the values of God. Jesus himself will manifest those values. To those who give expression to their own deepest fears by seeking to dominate others, Jesus shows the way of service. To those who seek to protect themselves either by separating themselves from people who are different or by pushing them away, he speaks of love. To those who are so tired and fearful that they want to give up trying, he offers the grace of God to persevere. The liberating values of the Kingdom are not like those of the kingdoms of this world. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed centuries before,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord (Is. 55:8).*

## **The Challenge to Women**

Side by side as faithful disciples of Christ, both men and women are called by God to make a difference in the world around them through the active testimony they offer in their daily lives. They are to be ambassadors of God's Kingdom. This invitation to all nonetheless often represents a particular challenge to women as it places a special calling upon them. As those who, down the centuries, have traditionally been associated with roles played out exclusively in the private sphere, the invitation to be disciples in the world can require a change of gear and mind-set. While recent decades have seen more and more women become powerful players in the public sphere, in person and online, many parts of the Church have persisted in defining women's role as one that is first and foremost engaged with the family. Yet women's Christian calling is not limited to, or defined by, their roles as wives or mothers. Just as women in Jesus' time responded to his revolutionary invitation to follow by journeying with him all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, so today, women are called to step out of their hiding places. They are invited to play their full part as confident heralds of the Kingdom wherever God has placed them.

Christ's call to his followers to be entrepreneurs for God's Kingdom, living fully as disciples of Christ in the world, can also come as a shock to women who have often been taught to think that 'real' Christian women must be demure and reticent, not to say passive. For centuries, churchgoers were instructed to believe that a virtuous woman in God's sight was a silent woman, and these instructions have seeped deep into our Christian DNA. Only now are women beginning to find

their voice and speak truthfully in public. For many, it still remains a huge challenge to do so. Yet Christ's call to full discipleship invites women to break free from the expectations with which tradition has often burdened them, and to reject the labels that have impeded their full and confident growth into the image of Christ.

Women who follow Jesus Christ are not called to stay trembling in the wings, for fear of being thought by the Church to be 'unwomanly' or 'unchristian'. As they respond to Christ's call, which is offered to men and women alike, they become full citizens of the Kingdom of God, allowing God to transform society through them. Even if this challenge to women may often have been side-lined by elements of the Christian Church in the past, it has always been ringing out loud and clear from the Scriptures. In this book, we ask what kind of spiritual journey women need to embark on, to respond to it anew for our own times.

### **Inspiration from Women Who Have Gone Before Us**

Down the centuries, preachers and writers have recounted wonderful stories about great men of God, and often omitted to tell the equally wonderful stories about great women. These latter stories lay largely forgotten to many parts of the Christian Church and have only recently started to re-emerge. This has inevitably led to a situation in which the Church has not quickly or easily understood women as agents of the Kingdom with substantial gifts to offer in Christian witness and mission.

If women are to play their full part as witnesses to God's Kingdom in the world, they need the encouragement offered by the testimonies of women who have gone before. They need to know by heart the remarkable stories of their indomitable Spirit-filled courage and gritty determination. Women, as well

as men, are bearers of God's image and faithful imitators of Christ.

## **Gospel Women**

In view of this, this book reflects unashamedly on the stories of the ordinary women made extraordinary who appear in the Gospel of Matthew. Each chapter offers a focus on one of these inspirational figures. As those who encountered Jesus, each one has a special story to tell; each one, in her own way, becomes an ambassador for the Kingdom of God. Some of them, like the Canaanite woman or the woman with the perfume, were only in Jesus' company for a matter of minutes or hours. Others, like the mother of James and John or Mary of Magdala, were in his company for a much longer time, perhaps a number of years. But whatever the length of the meeting, each one was transformed in one way or another by her encounter with Christ, and became a herald of the Kingdom. What might these Biblical women have to teach women today, as the Church grapples with the challenge of offering Christian witness in this divided world?

### *Women from Different Times*

Yet these Biblical women do not appear in this book on their own. Their stories are accompanied by parallel testimonies of courageous, visionary and feisty women of God from other times in Christian history. From the first centuries, we come across Perpetua and her slave Felicitas. We encounter Julian of Norwich from medieval times, and Teresa of Avila from the sixteenth century. From the seventeenth century, there is Margaret Fell, and from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we shall look at the testimonies of Sojourner Truth and Amy Carmichael to name but two. From modern times,

we meet, amongst others, Alice Domon and Karla Faye Tucker. The presence of these women in this book is an indication that the call to women to be active, faithful disciples in the world is not simply a product of modern thinking. God has *always* been calling women into the service of Christ and inviting them to play their full part as builders of Kingdom community, and women of faith have *always* been responding. As those called to be faithful today, we must raise the visibility of these our Christian sisters from other times and other places and be inspired and encouraged by their stories. In their turn, Christian women today need to learn the importance of telling their own stories of faith in their own voices in order to encourage those who come after them to live faithfully in their own times.

*... From Different Places*

The women included in the chapters that follow come also from a range of different countries. Amongst the women whom we look at from Matthew's Gospel, there are Jews and Canaanites, not to mention a Moabite and a Hittite. Amongst other witnesses quoted in this book, there are women from Europe, from Asia and Russia, not to mention the Americas and Africa. Standing alongside each other, these bold women of God remind us of the critically significant role that women have to play wherever they may find themselves in the international community of faith. Although culture plays an important part in shaping expectations and possibilities for action, the call itself to be an active player for the Kingdom of God is not ultimately dependent on the particular culture to which a woman belongs. In every place women are called by God to be unafraid, and to incarnate the values of the Kingdom for their own cultural context.

*... With Different Family Circumstances*

A range of different family circumstances are represented by the stories told here. Of the women included in this book, some are married or widowed, like the mother of James and John, Catherine Booth and Sabina Bell. Others are unmarried, such as Amy Carmichael and Alice Domon. Others again are divorced, such as Sojourner Truth who, once freed from slavery, parted from the man she had been forced to marry. Some have children, some do not. Whatever their marital status, these women remind us that God's principal calling upon women is to be faithful as disciples. After all, in the Gospels, Jesus never commanded anyone to go and get married or to go and have children. He called them to follow him.

*... Shaped by Different Christian Traditions*

The women we discuss in this book also represent a wide range of different Christian traditions. Sojourner Truth's powerful conversion experience came at the time she was living with the Wageners—a Quaker couple who had shared their faith with her. After leaving their home, she worshipped in a Methodist church. The evangelical Corrie ten Boom came from a Dutch Reformed Church background, while Mary Skobtsova, imprisoned also in Ravensbrück for having assisted Jews, was from the Russian Orthodox tradition. Sabina Bell came from an evangelical family, Alice Domon was a Roman Catholic, and Amy Carmichael, who was brought up in a Presbyterian home, ended up incorporating an eclectic selection of worship-styles into the services held in the community in India that she founded.

The history of the divisions that have torn the Church apart down through the centuries does not make for very uplifting reading! As those who have inherited the divisions,

we still suffer from the wounds inflicted by them. The women we discuss in this book worshipped in very different ways one from another and undoubtedly had very divergent views on many aspects of Christian faith and doctrine. However, each one of them, in relation to Christ, held passionately to a vision of the Kingdom that shaped her life. Each one longed to see the Kingdom become a reality and did not wait to set to work in the place where God had placed her. These women are placed alongside one another in this book as a sign that in his great goodness, God does not limit himself to inviting into his service only Evangelicals or only Catholics. Christ calls one and all, however different from one another we may be, to witness with faith and perseverance to his Kingdom in every corner of the world, even in the most distant and the most challenging of places.

*... Surrounded by Other Witnesses*

While this book presents the story of one woman of modern times in each chapter, it is also vitally important to remember that not one of them would have had the ministry she did without the support of others: family members, friends, colleagues and other Christians. Men and women of faith stand beside and behind each one. Hidden by the brevity of the biographies offered here, they nonetheless played a vital role in the witness of these women to the Gospel. Sojourner Truth never ceased to be grateful to the couple who had bought her freedom, while Corrie ten Boom expresses her gratitude, throughout her books, both to the upbringing and wisdom she received from her father and from the inspiration she drew from the spirituality of her sister. Alice Domon was supported by her colleagues and friends, by priests and parishioners who welcomed her, and by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo alongside whom she worked. Meanwhile, Sabina Bell was



supported by her husband in the same way as she supported him. Their lives stand as a reminder that women are not only to be supporters of others, both men and women, but also to be supported by others, both men and women. They lead us also to give thanks for the gift and dramatically inclusive nature of the Christian community into which God calls us.

### **A Call to All Women**

The names of a handful of the women in this book, such as Betsie and Corrie ten Boom, will probably be well-known to many readers. Other names will be known to only a few. Others again will be wholly unknown to all except those who knew them personally and to the author herself. They are presented here alongside one another, in deliberate defiance of the current cult of celebrity that often blinds us to the essential truth of the Gospel: each and every one of us is special to God and has an essential role to play in the life of the Kingdom. This can be a special challenge to those women who have assumed without question that those whose efforts ‘count’ most in the mission of God’s Kingdom must be the great men. The call to follow Christ faithfully in the world is not just offered to the famous, extraordinary few or to women who are specially singled out, but to each and every one.

### **The Parable of the Yeast**

As a teacher, Jesus never wrote theological treaties or used heavy theological language. Rather, he spoke of deep spiritual realities through the simple language of parables. The Kingdom of God “is like this”, Jesus often said: like the sower who goes out to sow, like the mustard seed, or the pearl of great value, or the treasure hidden in a field, or like the yeast that leavens the whole dough. Just as the surfaces of a diamond each reflect the

light differently, so each parable offers a myriad of different truths around the theme. Those who seek the Kingdom of God are invited to reflect on these parables, trusting that the divine values they express have the power to transform our individual lives and of those around us.

The one Biblical woman who accompanies us through each chapter in this book is the baker of Jesus' parable of the yeast. On the surface, the parable appears to offer a gentle, domestic image, but underneath it is bursting with hope, energy and the promise of dynamic transformation. Throughout this book, we shall be using this extraordinary parable as a lens through which to reflect on the nature of God's Kingdom and the way in which women become its ambassadors.

*He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."  
(Matt. 13:33)*

At the time of Jesus, the huge range of work that women did was very largely invisible. What in those days was thought of as 'proper' work—business management, crafting, building and selling, judging and writing—went on in the public sphere. This was generally considered to be a male-dominated space to which women did not belong. According to the thinking of the ancient world, women belonged to the private sphere, which was the hidden world of the home. Of course, they still did plenty of work in the home, including grinding the flour and baking the bread. It is quite clear that women were far from idle; their work was simply not recognised or valued as such. And while men—such as Matthew the *tax-collector* or Simon-Peter and Andrew the *fishermen*—were often defined according to the work they did in the public sphere, women—such as Mary *the mother of Jesus*—were not defined by their

activities but according to the relationships they had instead. More rarely, like Mary *of Magdala*, they were defined according to where they came from.

For all its brevity, the significance of the parable of the yeast grows deeper when seen against this cultural backdrop. In telling it, Jesus puts a woman centre-stage and makes her activity visible. In the same way, he makes women visible throughout the course of his ministry and calls them into full and active discipleship. What is more, in describing the way in which the baker kneads enough dough to satisfy an enormous crowd of hungry people, Jesus offers a powerful image of the way God is at work in the world, mixing the abundant life of the Kingdom into its furthest and most forgotten corners. This parable has the power to change the way we think, act and speak.

The world in which we live as Christ's disciples today has, arguably, always been a dangerous place, torn apart by fears and hatreds of every kind. However, the world does not seem to be getting any safer, fairer or more peaceful. Quite the opposite. As Jesus predicted, the poor are still with us. In recent years, we have seen violence continuing to rear its ugly head, threatening not only human communities, but also the very sustainability of God's creation. Continuing violence done to women forms a highly significant part of this devastating picture.

The language of division, of them-and-us, has become a commonplace in public discourse, both online and offline, while the recent coronavirus pandemic has served to highlight and exacerbate tensions and divisions between nations. This is not a time for the Christian Church to hide away in a cocoon of private or fearful spirituality. We are called to be followers of Christ not just within the community of the church or in the home, but in the world around us. The life of the Kingdom of God is not a reality reserved only for the Christian community

or for the family life of Christians. But, in Christ, it is offered to the whole of creation. What kind of Kingdom spirituality shall women need to equip them to fulfil this calling? As we reflect on the parable in the following chapters, we ask how we might live more faithfully as children of God and disciples of Christ, and how the yeast of the Kingdom might be active in every aspect of our daily lives.



# 1 CROSSING DIVIDES: THE OPEN KINGDOM



*If we are to better the future we must disturb the present.*

Catherine Booth<sup>1</sup>

*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.*

Mother Teresa of Calcutta<sup>2</sup>

I have a colleague who is almost obsessively passionate about making bread. She never stops talking about her most recent successes. She spends her days off experimenting with different recipes for wholemeal and devotes entire holidays to going on bread-making courses run by various famous bread chefs. One day, at the end of a meeting, she invited us all to stay on to watch her preparing her dough. She laid the ingredients out on the kitchen surface and went to work in front of us, explaining the various different stages of the process as she went. Excitement was written all over her face. I was captivated by the steely focus with which she set about the task, and the care she took over every detail. All the flour needed to be incorporated. She did not want to lose a single little bit.

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1 (1829–1890), co-founder of the Salvation Army with her husband William.

2 (1910–1997), Albanian-Indian religious, school-teacher, headmistress and founder of the Missionaries of Charity.

As I watched my friend at work, I learnt something important about the commitment that goes into making bread. No part of the dough can be neglected. A baker knows that for the bread to come out of the oven big and beautifully risen, the yeast cannot be allowed to stay just at the centre of the mixture. It has to be worked on equally throughout so that it can reach every corner of the mixture, even the flour at the very edges.

It is this same picture that lies at the heart of Jesus' extraordinary parable. Comparing the Kingdom of God to the way that yeast works, Jesus describes how the action of the yeast leavens not just a section of the dough, but the *whole* lump. By using this powerful image, Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God, just like the yeast, is alive and at work everywhere. Nowhere and no one is left out of God's purposes. There is no corner of the world from which God is entirely absent. No situation is so desperate that God has withdrawn from it. No place is too foreign or forgotten for the Kingdom of God to be at work there in all its mystery.

*Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast  
(Ps. 139:7–10).*

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts:  
the whole earth is full of his glory (Is. 6:3).*

## **The Ministry of Jesus: A Kingdom without Boundaries**

### *Everyone and Everywhere!*

The Kingdom of God is not the property of a few chosen people, but is offered to the whole world. Even the most superficial reading of the Gospel reminds us that the ministry of Jesus touched an enormous number of people. Jesus, in whom the Kingdom of God was fully and abundantly made known, was itinerant. Matthew's Gospel explains that following his baptism in the Jordan and his temptations in the desert, Jesus comes into Galilee and bases himself in Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. However, he does not stay there permanently. He rushes from place to place: from North to South and from East to West and back again. He has an ambitious schedule. First, he travels out to other towns and villages of Galilee, crossing the lake from time to time to reach the ten towns: a network of Gentile towns established by the Roman administration. Jesus travels equally towards Caesarea Philippi, and then further and northwards where he enters the region of Tyre and Sidon. Finally, he heads south into the towns and villages of Judea. Here, he enters Jerusalem and is acclaimed by the crowd before being arrested, tried, and put to death. Matthew then tells how the risen Christ also 'travels', appearing first in Jerusalem and then meeting his disciples back where his ministry started: in Galilee to the North. From here he commissions them and sends them out to proclaim the Gospel.

But it is not only Jesus who travels about in order to meet others: others travel to see and hear him from elsewhere. His ministry attracts crowds from places that were not included in his itinerary. Crowds flock to Galilee, drawn to him not only by the authority and quality of his teaching, but also by his power to heal. His reputation has spread far beyond the area that he

is able physically to cover himself. Matthew describes how Jesus' reputation extends as far as Syria (Matt. 4:24) and adds that vast numbers of people are attracted to Galilee from every direction. They come from the ten towns and from beyond the Jordan to the East, from the towns and villages of Galilee in the far North and from Judea in the South. The ministry of Jesus reaches an audience far wider and much more diverse than simply the population of Galilee and Jerusalem.

The geographical reach of Jesus' ministry is a concrete expression of his passionate vision of the Kingdom of God. God does not confine his interest to a small group of his favourites. The message of the Kingdom is intended not simply for people who are particularly spiritual or of especially religious disposition, or for those who think they understand the Scriptures better than others. It is not even directed solely to those whose lives might be deemed to be more sinful than others and in special need of help. Instead, God addresses everyone! He freely offers the new life of the Kingdom to poor as well as rich, to young and old, to city- and country-dwellers, regardless of their context, their level of spiritual understanding or their background. The message of the Kingdom of God is magnificently and devastatingly inclusive, pictured as the yeast at work in the *whole* dough of humanity.

### *Crossing the Boundaries of Gender*

The Kingdom of God is open to men and women alike. Undeterred by convention, Jesus receives hospitality and support from both women and men. He accepts invitations not just from men of high social standing, such as Pharisees, but also from women, such as Martha and Mary. His concern for those in need extends not just to men like the crippled man lowered down before him on a stretcher (Mark 2:1–12), but also



to women like the one with a haemorrhage (Matt. 9:20–22) and the one unable to stand tall (Luke 13:10–17). Meanwhile, Jesus crosses the boundaries and surprises his disciples by having a profound conversation with a lone Samaritan woman he meets under the midday sun at a well (John 4:6–26).

The first time that Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd with five loaves and two fish, Matthew is careful to specify that five thousand men were present, *not including the women and children* (Matt. 14:21). The second time he feeds a crowd, on this occasion out of a few fish and seven loaves, Matthew recounts that he feeds four thousand and specifies again *not including the women and children* (Matt. 15:38). Matthew is not just emphasising numbers here. Writing at a time in history when only men were really thought to count, Matthew is stressing the fact that it is not just men whose presence is important in the Kingdom of God: women and children are significant also. They have their equal part to play and cannot be made invisible.

### *Crossing the Boundaries of Expectation*

At the time of Jesus, those who were most readily considered to be the most spiritually aware, nearest to God, were those who belonged officially to the religious establishment. However, Matthew's Gospel offers an unexpected—not to say troubling—portrait of the Jewish authorities, such as the scribes, the priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. He depicts these characters as those who are, in fact, lacking in faith. The ones who should have been quick to discern the ways of God often show themselves to be nothing short of hypocrites who understand very little of the Kingdom's values,

*“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you*

*do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them” (Matt. 23:13).*

On the other hand, those whom the religious authorities think of as unclean: lepers, tax-collectors and prostitutes (Matt. 21:31–32), the lame and the mute (Matt. 15:29–31), are shown in the Gospel narrative to be close to the Kingdom. As Jesus says to his disciples,

*“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt. 21:31, NEB).*

The Gospels tell us that these ‘little people’ are almost always those who show evidence of amazing faith. Among them are a large number of women, not least Mary Magdalene, who becomes a witness to the empty tomb, or Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus who confesses Jesus to be the Messiah (John 11:27). Another such example is offered by the woman who walks in off the street and washes Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus has been invited to a Pharisee’s house, and when a woman of ill-repute walks in, the Pharisee is scandalised. Considering himself to be a man of God, he cannot see what could possibly be godly about the likes of such a woman. Jesus, however, sees the presence of the Kingdom at work in her humble attitude and loving action.

In encouraging others to follow him, Jesus does not stay with tradition and remain solely within the company of male disciples. We often forget this. Yet, the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus is followed and supported by women throughout his entire ministry. Luke tells us of the women who followed him even on his way to execution (Luke 23:27–28), while Matthew tells us that women were present at the crucifixion, watching Jesus’ death from a distance (Matt. 27:55). They were there!

This is the surprise Jesus has for us. The Kingdom of God is open to one and all, women and men alike, and does not depend on social standing or public reputation. God comes to us just as we are and sees not our past or even our present. Above all, he sees our future as his children, as disciples of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom.

### **Karla Faye Tucker**

Even those written off by a ruthless human justice system and deemed to have no future are offered hope in the whole-heartedly inclusive vision of the Kingdom. Few women better illustrate this than Karla Faye Tucker (1959–1998), a young American woman condemned to death by the court of the state of Texas. In the eyes of the world she had no future. She had been addicted to drugs from the age of 11 and had followed her mother into a life of prostitution. One night in 1983, she went out with her boyfriend with the intention of stealing some motorbike parts from a man they both intensely disliked. Under the influence of drugs, and excited by the thrill of violence, they killed him savagely. As they boasted shamelessly of their exploit to their friends, they were very quickly apprehended and found guilty.

While she was in jail awaiting trial, Karla went to a meeting that had been organised by the prison's chaplaincy team. She was struck by the peace and joy she found there, "They had a peace and a joy—something that was real. I had never seen that in anybody."<sup>3</sup> That night, as she turned the pages of the Bible, she understood the full horror of what she had done. Later she described

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3 Linda Strom, *Karla Faye Tucker Set Free: Life and Faith on Death Row* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2000), p. 49.

how, as she knelt down begging for forgiveness, she felt the love of God pouring into her.

After that, her life would never be the same again. Something within her had profoundly changed and God's new life so overflowed from her that everyone in the prison noticed the difference. She became involved in the life of the prison's chaplaincy, doing all she could to touch the lives of her fellow-prisoners. She recognised the transformation that had come upon her. "I love life now," she admitted. "Instead of taking lives I just want to share the life in me."<sup>4</sup> The reach of the Kingdom of God had not stopped at the prison gate, or at the door of her cell, and Karla had become its passionate ambassador. After her conversion, Death Row, where she awaited the verdict of human justice with fear in her heart, became the very context in which the yeast of the Kingdom was at work. She renamed it "Life Row". Gradually, the atmosphere in the common room changed. The chaplaincy team visited the prisoners of Life Row at times when they needed to be encouraged. Everyone was welcomed by the warmth of Karla's smile and encouraged and upheld by her prayers. In order to start living for the Kingdom of God, Karla did not wait for her trial to be over or to be released from jail. She did not wait for a time when life would have been better. Death Row became the context in which she offered herself, immediately, as a witness to the Kingdom and as a builder of Kingdom relationships. Through the renewal of her own life, her faith had a dramatic impact on prison life around her.

At the beginning of her Christian life, Karla was greatly encouraged by being forgiven by Peggy, the sister

of the man she had murdered. The Sunday after the murder, before the murderer had been identified, Peggy had gone to church as usual. When Peggy walked into the church, the whole church started to pray for the person who had killed her brother. Later, Karla was to believe that it was thanks to the prayers of this church that her life had so radically been changed. Sometime after Karla had been sentenced to death, she received a letter from Peggy. In it, Peggy had written both that she had forgiven Karla, and that she loved her, and asked her to telephone. And so, a fortnight later, Karla rang Peggy. The conversation they had firmly anchored Karla into her new life in Christ. The two women continued to correspond. A very long time afterwards, Peggy spoke honestly about what had happened. She admitted freely that she hated the circumstances in which her brother was killed. “But,” she said, “he is in the hands of the Lord. I didn’t lose him. I know where he is. Karla became like a little sister to me.”<sup>5</sup>

Karla continued to grow in faith, and during the 14 years she spent on Life Row, she lived as an evangelist. In spite of the many voices that testified to her transformation and asked for mercy, George W. Bush, governor of Texas at the time, refused to grant a stay of execution and on 3 February 1998, Karla became the first woman in more than a century to receive the death penalty. On the day of her execution, there were two groups of people waiting outside the prison gates: those who remembered the horror of her crime and felt that the death penalty was a fitting punishment, and those who had seen the transformation that had been at work, and who recognised the passionate and faithful

citizen of the Kingdom of God that this young woman had become.

Karla told her friends not to cry for her. “When you’ve done something like I’ve done and you’ve been forgiven for it and you’re loved—that has a way of so changing you. I have experienced real love. I know what forgiveness is, even when I’ve done something so horrible. I know that because God forgave me when I accepted what Jesus did on the cross. When I leave here I’m going to be with Him.”<sup>6</sup> Karla often prayed that the Church would look beyond the divisions created by denominations, by race and by prison walls. She knew from her own experience that the yeast of the Kingdom was at work even in the most distant and unlikely part of the dough.

The yeast of the Kingdom can also be at work in us. The extent of the Kingdom does not stop at the door of our heart. Each and every one has a part to play in the life of the Kingdom, no matter our past or our present circumstances. Sometimes we can imagine that our context or our background excludes us from the Kingdom’s reach; the memory of past failures and our feelings of guilt can gnaw away at us and make us defensive. If we are accustomed to judging ourselves severely, we can find it difficult to believe that we could possibly be forgiven. Sometimes we can feel so despairing at the course of social and political events that we cannot imagine that opening ourselves to the life of the Kingdom of God could possibly make a difference to anyone or anything.

However, when Jesus announces that the Kingdom of God is at hand, he promises that it will change everything. Those who follow him will experience a new reality: forgiveness and

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6 Strom, *Karla Faye Tucker Set Free*, 25.