

## Cork Scripture Group



*Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.*

Psalm 119:105

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### *“But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27): Women's diakonia in Luke's Gospel*

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What does the word *diakonia* mean? Most translations of Luke's Gospel describe it as 'service' or 'to serve' and in some cases it is also translated as 'to minister' or 'ministry.' However, the BDAG Lexicon gives a wide range of definitions for the word stretching from the concept of service to the idea of someone being sent to carry out a task or perform a role.

Why are we talking about *diakonia* (διακονία) in particular with regard to the women in Luke's Gospel? A very interesting statistic might begin to answer the question. The word *diakonia* or the verb διακονέω is used nine times in Luke's Gospel. Jesus refers to it in two of his parables (12:37; 17:8) and he uses it three times at a crucial time in his teaching immediately after the Last Supper (22:27, 28). In the four other times when it is used, it refers to women. Luke never actually uses it about men. There is then a dramatic change in Acts when all, but one, of the references are to men.

We will first look at each of the stories where *diakonia* is associated with women.

#### **The healing of Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39 and 40-41)**

The first woman to encounter Jesus in his adult ministry is Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39). Jesus goes to Simon's house, where he has probably been invited for the main meal of the day which would take place after the Sabbath service and here he is asked to help the woman who has been struck down by a very serious fever. While the healing of the woman is the second miracle recounted in the gospel, it is the first one where the person is identified as an individual (even if that is only in relation to her son-in-law). This pericope takes place in the private arena of a house, where Jesus is shown great hospitality. He has just come from the synagogue where there have already been signs of antagonism towards him. The demon shouted at him when he performed the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum (4:34) and, before that, Jesus was rejected by his own people in the synagogue in Nazareth and driven out of the town (4:29). If we look carefully at the text we see that Simon's mother-in-law is given a prominent place in verse 38 as *πενθερά* (mother-in-law) is sandwiched between two mentions of Simon.

Jesus is presented as a very distant figure in the description of this healing. He doesn't speak to the woman. He stands over her, draws on God's power from on high and rebukes the fever. Rebuke is usually used to describe casting out evil spirits and it has been used in this way in the exorcism that has taken place in the synagogue immediately prior to this. The two miracles are

described in a similar manner because Luke often sees physical illness as demonic and so treats it as similar to possession by unclean spirits. It shows that Jesus has authority over both demons and illness and is equipped to carry out the mission of release that he had announced in Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

When the fever releases Simon's mother-in-law, she responds immediately with service (*diakoneo*). This probably involves preparing and serving a meal for those present. In some households, the woman would have the responsibility for the preparation of the food but would not always serve at table. Some religious regulations did not permit women to appear in front of strangers and, at other times, Sabbath restrictions prevented her from serving a rabbi. However, while she is not the householder/ the hostess, since the narrative makes no mention of both her son-in-law and daughter, she becomes the central figure in the household and is the person who epitomises the service. She is in fact the first person to respond to Jesus since he began his ministry. At this stage there is no mention of Jesus having called any disciples to follow him and so, it could be said that Simon's mother-in-law is the first person, male or female, who is reported as functioning as a disciple and following him.

The woman responds not just to Jesus by service but to the others who are with him as well. The others are obviously people who have been impressed by Jesus' teaching or the exorcism that has just taken place in the synagogue or it may be Simon and some of his family. The woman now serves both Jesus and these people.

The woman's serving foreshadows Jesus' service later that day. Luke tells us that as evening arrives, people brought the sick to Jesus, who laid his hands on each of them and cured them (4:40). Interestingly, the verb *θεραπεύω* (*therapeuo*) that is used does not just signify 'to cure' but also 'to serve.' In fact, Luke gives it the meaning 'to serve' in Acts 17:25. The *diakonia* that Jesus models is a different type of service to that of the woman as he heals the sick that are brought to him and releases others from demons (4:40-41). However, by juxtaposing the two verbs, Luke shows the woman collaborating with Jesus in his work of healing and serving others. That ministry continues throughout the whole day. Jesus, the servant leader, is joined by the woman in that service.

So as well as being a visible manifestation of Jesus' healing, Simon's mother-in-law is also a model of service not only in her own right but also working alongside Jesus.

### **Galilean Women who followed Jesus (8:2-3)**

At the last presentation, we looked in great detail at the Galilean women who followed Jesus. The twelve along with some women, including three named women, were following Jesus, listening to him and learning to be disciples. Among that group we also hear mention of a group of women who 'provided for them out of their resources.' Once again the term service or *diakonia* is used. While Simon's mother-in-law provided a meal and hospitality, the Galilean women develop the concept of *diakonia* still further by the expenditure of resources and provision of ongoing material support to Jesus and the group around him in any way they can.

The women are a mixture of single, widowed and married women, but all provide. There is nothing to say that all the women are wealthy but neither are they all destitute. The group could contain wealthy women like Joanna, who could provide patronage, divorced or widowed women, who could contribute out of their *kettuba*<sup>1</sup> or dowry and poorer women who could provide basic resources. Readers, having just followed the story of the woman who anointed Jesus when she bought an extravagant alabaster jar of perfume, broke it open (meaning that it could not be used again), and proceeded to anoint Jesus with very lavish hospitality (7:37-38), now presume that these women are willing to give with generosity.

As in the case of Simon's mother-in-law, the women provide, not only for Jesus, but for the whole group travelling with him. In this, they imitate Jesus and the broad concept of service that has already been evident in the scenes of healing, service and hospitality (4:40-44; 5:15; 5:17-26; 5:29; 6:18-19; 7:11-17).

### **A much broader definition of *diakonia***

At this stage in Luke's Gospel, we have encountered two types of *diakonia*, the household and table service of Simon's mother-in-law and the broader provision of financial and practical support of the Galilean women. An even broader understanding of *diakonia* can be seen in both the Gospel and Acts. Examples include service at table (4:39; 10:40; 12:37), providing resources (8:3; Acts 6:1) and delivering a service (Acts 6:4) or being sent to carry out a service or perform a role (Acts 19:22). Studies of *diakonia* in recent years recommend that the emphasis should be on the motivation for the work rather than the type of work involved and therefore it should not be seen primarily as a benevolent action on behalf of someone, but a sending "on behalf of the person or authority who mandated the activity."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, readers should see it as focusing on service of God, the one who has commissioned the action, rather than on any particular service. What is important is that the women, whether serving at table or providing out of their own resources, are all motivated as followers of Jesus.

### **Martha and Mary: further clarification of *diakonia***

The story of Martha and Mary (10:38-42) is often described as a comparison between the active and contemplative life or between prayer and action. However, since we are looking at the concept of *diakonia* in this presentation, we are going to focus on Martha and her service.

Before we examine the story, we must keep in mind that the gospel stories were written to be read sequentially. Readers, or more likely listeners, in the early church built up a cumulative picture based on what had gone before in the gospel. Therefore, it is very important to realise that the parable immediately preceding this passage begins with Jesus' teaching on loving God

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<sup>1</sup>The *ketubah* restates the fundamental conditions that are imposed by the Torah upon the husband, such as providing his wife with food, clothing and conjugal rights, which are inseparable from marriage. It includes the husband's guarantees to pay a certain sum in the event of divorce and inheritance rights obligatory upon his heirs in case he dies before his wife.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Collins, "A Monocultural Usage: *Διακον*-words in Classical Hellenistic and Patristic Sources," *VC* 66 (2012), 287-309: 301.

and loving neighbour. He then proceeds to widen the definition of neighbour through his recounting of the parable, which demonstrates the mercy and compassion of the Samaritan for the victim as he actively cares for him and (while the word is not used) demonstrates *diakonia* in action (10:25-37). Therefore, this pericope should be read in conjunction with the preceding parable as Jesus continues to teach about what it means to be a disciple.

As Jesus enters the village, two key verbs (*εἰσερχομαι* and *ὑποδέχομαι*) are used to show that he is welcomed with hospitality and that he accepts that hospitality. Martha is the model of that hospitality and of the *diakonia* that is involved. She is an independent woman, head of the house here and seems relatively prosperous as she hosts Jesus on his journey. Readers see this woman as yet another personification of *diakonia*.

However, as the story develops, certain ambiguities emerge with regard to Martha's service. The unusual verb (*περισπάομαι*) that is used to describe Martha's busyness with regard to her service can also mean agitation. So, is the fact that "Martha was distracted by her many tasks" (10:40)

- simply a neutral statement?
- is the busyness understandable as she is showing hospitality and ministering as hostess in her home by entertaining an important guest who arrived unannounced?
- is her *diakonia* very praiseworthy as she does it out of love or devotion for Jesus?
- On the other hand is the fact that the verb also means agitation implying that something is not right in her attitude?

Martha speaks to the Lord and reproaches him with an accusatory question. It is very self-centred as she begins by suggesting that he does not care about her and then uses personal pronouns to refer to herself and her difficulties three times (*μου, με, μοι*) and complains that she has been left to do the ministering or serving on her own (*μόνος*). "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (10:40). She describes Mary as "my sister" and requests that Jesus tell "her" to help, thus ignoring Mary, who is beside her by Jesus' feet as she speaks to him. It is obvious too that Martha's address to Jesus is quite sharp and definitely not the language of hospitality. It takes the focus away from Jesus, her guest, and the hospitality and service that is his due.

The Lord's reply moves the spotlight to Martha's attitude rather than her complaint about Mary not helping and he chides her for being worried and agitated about many things. He is not criticising *diakonia* as this has been seen as a positive attribute of discipleship (4:39; 8:1-3), but he is criticising her attitude which is choking her ability to hear the word of God and put it into practice (8:14). Finally he rebukes Martha for her attitude to her sister and warns her that Mary's choice must be respected. Nothing is said about Martha's reaction and readers are left wondering in the end about the outcome.

So the concept of *diakonia* is developed even more in the story of Martha and Mary. We already know that it can be table service and the providing of resources and support, but there is something more here. Martha's service fits in perfectly with the concept of *diakonia*. She welcomes Jesus, invites him to her home and provides for him (and whoever is with him), but she fails to follow Mary's example and listen to the Word of God that comes from Jesus. She is so caught up in worrying and being 'hyper-busy' that she misses out on really connecting with

Jesus. To return to Collins' broader definition of *diakonia*, she does not appreciate **who** is recommending this service and **why** it is demanded.

This is the **last time** that the term *diakonia* is used to refer to anyone other than Jesus in Luke's Gospel. In 9:51, Luke tells us "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." As he sets out on this journey with his disciples, there are fewer miracles described and the focus is very much on Jesus and his disciples, as he teaches them about the Kingdom of God and how to be his disciples. The women have already imitated Jesus' service in the first half of the Gospel. Now Jesus consolidates its importance by direct teaching and parables.

### **The Parables regarding *diakonia* (12:35-38; 17:7-10)**

In the first of these parables, the servants are ready and waiting when the master comes home and his reaction is to sit them down to a meal and serve them, thus reversing the normal roles of master and slave (12:35-38). In doing this, the Lord is showing the importance of *diakonia* and especially of servant leadership.

In the second, Jesus explains that when the slave comes in from the fields, he is still expected to serve his master before he eats and drinks himself as there is nothing unusual in this and it is what is expected of a slave (17:7-10). Service is what is expected of the follower of Jesus.

On first reading, these parables seem to contradict one another but in fact they are two sides of the same coin. We are all called to serve and in serving we are doing the work of the Lord and therefore it is what is expected of us as followers of Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus models that service during his earthly ministry and calls his servants to do the same. Moreover, the Lord values those who serve and will reward them for that service.

### **Jesus' teaching on *diakonia***

*Read 22:26-27 and see what Jesus says about diakonia*

Immediately after the Last Supper, a high point in the Gospel (22:26-27), Jesus gives his crucial teaching about *diakonia*. He points out that he is among them as one who serves and therefore reveals himself as the servant leader. Having begun his ministry with healing service, he now concludes his ministry by setting this service as a standard for all of his followers, thus challenging them to imitate his example of servant leadership. Furthermore, by proclaiming and exemplifying this service, readers are left in no doubt as to what their response should be. "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.<sup>27</sup> For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:26-27).

To return to the women at the beginning of this presentation, it is women throughout Luke's Gospel who epitomise the *diakonia* that Jesus lives and teaches throughout his ministry. A number of men for example, the men who bring the paralysed man to Jesus (5:18) and Levi who organizes a banquet for Jesus (5:29), demonstrate *diakonia* but it is never actually named as such. However, it is the women in Luke's Gospel who exemplify the servant leadership that he explicitly preaches in what is his farewell speech to his disciples after the Last Supper.

## **Things Change in the Acts of the Apostles**

In Luke's Gospel, there is a clear emphasis on how the women model *diakonia* and Jesus' teaching confirms this service. In fact, by placing his teaching on servant leadership immediately after the Last Supper, it could be said that he makes it his last will and testament and, therefore, wants it to be taken very seriously by his followers. The women disciples seem to have a very good understanding of this concept as we journey through the gospel.

We are not looking at the Acts of the Apostles tonight but I leave you with something to explore for yourselves. Acts was also written by Luke and probably completed shortly after the Gospel. Yet there is a very different picture of *diakonia* in Acts. It is men who are now described as providing *diakonia*. It is used with regard to service, ministry of the Word and of the Eucharist.

*Read Acts 6:1-6 and see how you understand this. Why do you think this change occurred?*