

Followers of the Way

What is a man?

Lynda Rose, 10-07-22

Judges 4:1-22

If you go back through history, it always seems like men have been centre stage, doesn't it? They've taken an unquestioned lead, fought wars, gone exploring, been great artists ... thought great thoughts ... but what does it mean to be a man now, in the 21st century? From the beginning of the last century, when feminism began its fight to allow the voice of women to be heard and to achieve equal rights, we've seen increasingly a shift in power. In some ways this has been good. Women are free now to use their gifts in ways that were once unimaginable. And women do have gifts, God-given gifts, that do sometimes outstrip those of their male counterparts. So why shouldn't they be allowed to use them?

But, in the relentless drive to achieve 'equality', it seems increasingly obvious that something has gone badly wrong. Women seem to be working non-stop, following demanding careers as they juggle - sometimes badly - care for their families and home. And for many men it feels like they've lost direction - they don't know what they're supposed to be, or how they're supposed to act, any more. In fact, they've been so busy getting in touch with their feminine side, that many seem to have lost what it is to be male. The sad truth is that, when it comes to 'identity', society seems to be encouraging a kind of systemic distortion, that benefits neither women nor men.

So exactly what is a man? Physically and culturally, we know that men tend to be bigger and stronger than women, and that they're more naturally competitive and aggressive. It's sometimes said that their testosterone levels make them behave badly, and that they *need* the civilising effects of women. And we know that stereotypically women tend to be smaller and not so strong and, though they are competitive, they're generally seen as gentler and less confrontational, warmer, more supportive of others ... empathic and loyal. But in recent years, all this has got a bit jumbled. With the emphasis on rights, women seem to have been getting more independent and aggressive - more 'masculine'. And at the same time men,

faced by a constant barrage of accusation about patriarchal control and misogyny, with demands they get in touch with their feelings ... seem confused. And in fact many men today seem to behave very badly, because the traditional values of honour, discipline and responsibility – once the defining characteristics of what it was to be a man – are no longer held of value.

So at one level it can be said, with some justification, that men in the 21st century are being emasculated by the head-on assault of feminism. But if that's true, it can equally be said that women, adopting the aggressive drive of men in their quest to achieve parity, are also losing what it is to be a woman. Perhaps all the fuss about same sex attractions and gender confusion, bedeviling society, are not just to be expected in the current climate, but inevitable. Both men and women today stand in danger of losing the defining characteristics of what it is to be male or female, with the result that the whole of humanity is suffering.

So what does the Bible say about all this? After all, maybe I'm wrong and behaviour is just a social construct and the result of conditioning.

Our starting point has to be Genesis. Chapter 1, v.27, 'So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.' What this means is that God created us from the beginning to be different – male and female – but the totality of us together *is* His image. God isn't male, and He isn't female. Men and women individually reflect different aspects of His being, but together we reflect the image of God. Men and women complement and complete each other, together and jointly reflecting the image of God.

To put it another way, the male and the female aspects, which are both essential parts of God's being, are manifested and made holy in our difference and complementarity. Which means that the male and female are both very *and equally* important. The one is not inferior or subservient to the other, but the man and woman fit together, enabling 'wholeness', and they mustn't therefore become blurred. What is distinctively masculine is good, and what is distinctively feminine is good.

So what, in the Biblical presentation, is distinctively male? Traditionally, men have been the hunter/gatherers and warriors, whose task has been to provide and care for their mate, who in turn has given the stability, care, and love that provided the foundation for the family – without which, of course, the man couldn't function. So from the beginning men and women

were created to live in a symbiotic relationship, that allowed for our best functioning together and happiness. This can only happen when men and women are both properly fulfilling their roles.

We need to understand what those roles are, and it's instructive here to look at Deborah in the book of Judges. For those who say women shouldn't hold authority, Deborah was a prophetess and judge in Israel in the period before the monarchy. She was revered and loved, and she led the people at a time when they were under threat from the Canaanite king Jabin, whose army was led by Sisera. She was actually an amazing lady. The only other person to be both a prophet and judge in Israel in the Old Testament was Samuel, so this gives you some idea of her standing.

Well Israel at the time had done evil in the sight of the Lord, who had responded by stirring up Jabin against them. Sound a bit familiar maybe with what's going on in the world today? But anyway, the Israelites repented and cried out to the Lord for help and, as result, the word of the Lord came to Deborah. She summoned Barak, v.6, and said to him, 'The Lord, the God of Israel commands you, 'Go, take position at Mt Tabor ... I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army ... with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Now this is interesting, because Deborah, a leader of Israel, is keeping within the defined male/female roles. She's clearly 'in charge', but there's no suggestion she's going to go and fight, she's simply passing on the Lord's command. But Barak, as a man, doesn't step up to the mark. He doesn't trust. Instead, he says to Deborah, 'If you go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go' (v.8). This is actually disobedience to the Lord, and there's an immediate response. Deborah says she'll go, but she adds, 'the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.'

And of course she does go, and the Lord is faithful to His word and Israel has a resounding victory. But because of his failure to step up to the mark, Barak does not get the glory, and Sisera is killed by Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite.

What are we to take from this? First off, that God requires and will honour our absolute obedience. But also that He Himself upholds our difference, because we reflect His image in union, *together*. Deborah was His mouthpiece and the unquestioned anointed judge and leader of Israel, but at no point did He tell her as a woman to go to war. She went, of course,

with Barak, but that was in response to his spinelessness, and so she did no wrong.

We all need now to recover our identity before God. It is entirely right that women should use their gifts – and that may well involve leadership. But it's the anointing/the calling that's important, and both men and women alike must remain true to their God-given identity. Otherwise humanity is damaged. Men now must have the courage to rediscover what it is to be a man, and to live fearlessly in honour, purity, uprightness and truth.