

# OUTSIDERS IN THE GOSPELS

## Marginality as a Source of Knowledge

By JANE KOPAS

**T**HE GOSPELS ARE POPULATED WITH a cast of marginal women and men. In the drama of Jesus' life and death, these outsiders play major supporting roles. They are the ones who best understand Jesus' message. More importantly, the outsiders in the gospels have a wisdom of their own to share.

### *The insight of outsiders*

Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna describe the margin as the context in which those who suffer injustice, inequality and exploitation live their lives.<sup>1</sup> At the edges of abundance they lack sufficient material resources that others have, and they lack the voice to make their experience count as worth knowing. In many societies insiders, a small group of people in positions of influence, present their views as objective 'truth'. Those who live at the margins of influence do not participate in the production or shaping of knowledge. When the marginalized can make their voices heard, they challenge the powerful to re-define truth.

The marginalized see the world differently, and in terms of justice, more truly. Outsiders learn to think from two perspectives and to speak two languages. They understand the language and practices of insiders because they have to operate according to the rules and privileges of insiders. At the same time, they know the rules and privileges of insiders do not apply in their own personal and social lives. Insiders, on the other hand, do not need to know any language other than their own because it gets them all they need. Nowhere is the authenticity of marginal knowledge more evident than in the gospels. There the early Christian community remembers the ways that Jesus heard the voices of 'outsiders' and validated the truth of their experiences. According to the gospel writers, Jesus both allowed the marginalized to speak their truth, and he also experienced that truth by being marginalized himself.

Among the outsiders in the gospels, women represent a significant group. They are not the only marginalized people, but they comprise a special population. Men and women alike suffer the same kinds of

exclusion through illness, poverty and lack of social status. But women suffer double exclusion. They are marginalized because of their sex in addition to these other factors.

Some of the ways that women experience unique forms of marginality include female 'illness' or uncleanness (menstruation), poverty (economic dependence on a husband or son), marital status (lack of social standing due to widowhood or single state), education (including education within religion), work (limits of forms of work, especially prostitution), religious standing (inability to participate fully in expressing Mosaic law) and relationships (derivative value through status of being wife and mother).

In examining the role of the marginalized as 'knowers' in the gospel, I will highlight both women and men. In examining some of the dialogues with women, however, it will become evident that their ability to speak the language of oppressed and oppressor gives them a special coping mechanism.

### *Jesus as an outsider*

There are many ways of being marginalized. One may be an outsider economically, politically, religiously, sociologically or sexually, to mention a few. The gospels contain many examples of each of these categories. Jesus himself exemplifies outsider status in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup> He was marginal as regards his origins in national and world history, as regards his death as an outsider, as regards his departure from work and village and his place in the urban setting of Jerusalem, as regards the non-traditional source of his teaching and ideas, and as regards his anti-establishment role as a poor person who had no power base and was not integrated into the dominant culture. Finally, in some sense Jesus marginalized himself, choosing to remain within his outsider position where he perceived and evaluated the world from a different standpoint.

Jesus draws others who are marginalized into his inclusive community, but they never entirely lose their marginal status because they do not become a part of the established power base in society. Whether the people Jesus invites into his circle of friends are marginalized because of illness, poverty, occupation or social status, he helps them discover personal and social values that transcend the standards of worth set in the larger society. He integrates them into a community that is prophetic and that functions as a continuing challenge to the larger community when that populace fails to recognize and do something to include the marginalized.

At times the marginality of Jesus seems to set up an opposition between God and 'the world'. The apparent dualism that results has sometimes been interpreted as a power struggle between God and world. Rather than separating him from others, Jesus' marginality puts him more deeply into the world by highlighting his vulnerability. That vulnerability becomes more apparent as we examine his relationship with other outsiders.

The outsider status of the poor, the ill or diseased, the religiously excluded, and the politically or socially excluded represent target populations for studying the truths that can be learned from the marginalized. While examples of each of these categories may be found in all four gospels, particular gospels offer opportunities to focus on one or another.

### *The poor*

The poor represent a primary category of outsiders. During the time of Jesus, the majority of the population were either poor peasants who lived in agricultural or fishing villages or low class urbanites in the few pre-industrial cities. Beggars and slaves constituted the most marginalized population. These groups together made up 98% of the inhabitants of Jesus' world. Less than 2% belonged to the élite population. Poverty marginalized a large group of people since power and access to resources were limited. Jesus directed his good news to this population, especially the poorest of the poor.<sup>3</sup>

Those who live at the centre of a sphere of influence comprise a small group. Because of their position of security, they usually insulate themselves from the day to day realities of the life of the marginalized who remain 'invisible'. In Luke's Gospel one finds a number of examples of the poor challenging the understanding of insiders.

The voices of widows were silenced because they had no status in society. At the same time, they were the poorest of the poor without a male source of support or the opportunity to support themselves. Luke tells the stories of the widow of Nain whose only son died (Lk 7:11-17), the widow who offered her only small coin at the temple (Lk 21:1-4), and the widow who sought justice from the unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8). Jesus hears the voices of the marginalized poor, even though, like widows, they are often silent voices. He not only hears them, but he also uses them as examples for others.

The widow who pleads with the judge for justice becomes an example of courage and persistence for other outsiders (Lk 18:1-8). The widow had no one as advocate for her rights since she had no husband whose

voice would be respected. Jesus contrasts the outsider widow who keeps pleading for her rights with the insider judge who is self-sufficient. The judge finally grants her a hearing in order to stop her from bothering him. Jesus observes that God will not be slow to hear and respond to the needs of people in distress.

We do not get to hear the speech of this poor widow directly, but it is clear that she understands what it takes to get a hearing from the judge. She is an outsider, but she knows he does not want his comfort disturbed and will eventually give in. She has enough confidence in her knowledge as an outsider to trust her nagging will pay off.

Luke's parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus who languishes starving at his door illustrates another challenge for the satisfied and comfortable to open their eyes to the need before them (Lk 16:19-31). The rich man protests that he was unaware of the needs of the other. But God in the parable does not accept it as an excuse for his failing to respond. The parable shows the difficulty rich insiders have in understanding God's justice.

Luke's Gospel abounds with example after example of the importance of responding to the poor but, more importantly, of hearing the truth they have to speak. What do these outsiders know? They know that a non-possessive attitude toward material things makes it possible to trust in God (Lk 12:22-31), that the good news is news for the poor (Lk 4:18), that we cannot celebrate in good conscience without considering the plight of those who are outside the celebration (Lk 14:12-14).

Here in the gospel the poor themselves find their experience confirmed, and those non-poor who do not live on the margins find they need to keep listening to the truth of the poor.

While the gospels do not challenge the social structures of their time in the modern sense of calling for widespread social reform, their implications for contemporary Christians are clear. If Christians believe that social structures as well as individuals can oppress people, it follows that social systems need to be restructured to make it possible to hear outsiders. Economic systems like capitalism or political systems like dictatorships are to be made accountable for their treatment of outsiders.

### *The ill*

Illnesses and diseases during the time of Jesus were often seen as the punishment of God or the result of sin. However strongly the victims felt the spiritual implications, they were equally oppressed by the social consequences. Whatever the cause of illnesses, the afflicted person could

not participate in the fullness of a social life.<sup>4</sup> Lack of energy, lack of mobility, and the avoidance of others for fear of contamination made sick people outcasts. The very persons most in need of assurance and consolation were the ones most deprived of it. Mark's Gospel offers a variety of ways that illness makes outsiders of people.

The afflictions we find in Mark's Gospel include, among other things, dreaded skin diseases (Mk 1:40-44), paralysis or atrophy (Mk 2:1-11), demonic possession (Mk 5:1-19), gynaecological disorder (Mk 5:25-34), and blindness (Mk 8:22-25, 10:46-52). A few of these examples will show the ways that outsiders who are ill have a unique source of knowledge about God's mercy.

Mark (as well as Matthew and Luke) relates an incident in which Jesus cures a man afflicted with a skin disease (Mk 1:40-44). Since many skin conditions might have been described as leprosy, it is difficult to know if this man's condition was truly Hansen's disease. Whatever it was, it functioned to exclude him from society. Jesus followed the cure with the requirement that the man present himself to the priest to prove to everyone he was cured. We might be inclined to interpret the cure and priestly requirement primarily as evidence of Jesus' miraculous power. It is more likely that Jesus wanted a recognized authority to testify that the man was fit to return to society. Jesus sought to assure that he would no longer be marginalized by his illness.

Likewise, the cure of the man who was paralysed (Mk 2:1-12) demonstrates a twofold restoration of relationships. When Jesus tells the man his sins are forgiven, the religious leaders criticize him for blasphemy. In following spiritual healing with physical healing, Mark illustrates a healed relationship with God and with the community. To illustrate his reintegration into daily society, he commands him to pick up his mat and 'go home'. Overcoming outsider status, he can now be 'at home' in his relationships. Each of these afflicted persons seeks out Jesus in the knowledge that there is more to a cure than the relief of physical discomfort.

Mark's presentation of the healing of the woman with a persistent haemorrhage brings to light another kind of exclusion (Mk 5:25-34). Women were denied full participation in society in a variety of ways, one of the principal of which was their 'uncleanness'. A man could not touch a menstruating woman, even one of his own household. The woman had lived with her exclusion long enough to know the mind of the system that oppressed her. Her knowledge overcame her fear of acting and enabled her to rationalize that it would be acceptable if she only touched Jesus' cloak.

When she was discovered, instead of chastising her, Jesus told her that her faith had made her well. In fact it was not only faith that made her well. Her courage to use 'the system' to deal with her fear made it possible for her to be restored to normal relationships.

The gospel connections between illness and exclusion shed light on contemporary connections between illness and exclusion. The exclusion people with AIDS suffer is compounded by the exclusion they may already suffer if they are rejected because they are homosexual or intravenous drug users. The exclusion the impoverished ill or elderly suffer is compounded by their lack of access to adequate care as well as to the comfort of caring companions. The exclusion that victims of environmental diseases suffer is compounded by the lack of response on the part of those who control working conditions. As is the case in other forms of marginalization, rarely does one suffer a single form of marginality. Not only women but at times other outsiders as well experience separation through a convergence of exclusions.

#### *The religiously excluded*

Matthew's Gospel offers a valuable perspective on those whose religion has marginalized them. Religious traditions may exclude people from full participation or full status by specifying ritual impurity (Mt 23:25), lack of perfect observance of the Law (Mt 12:1-2), association with unacceptable people (Mt 9:10-11), and gender inferiority (Mt 5:31-32). Those who exercise religious authority in the gospels often suggest or state that the quality of a person's relationship with God depends upon how they fulfil certain external requirements. Jesus challenges that position over and over in Matthew's Gospel. Without examining all of the ways the gospel questions the false righteousness of religious insiders, a few instances will illustrate its attitude toward those who are religious outsiders and those who have made them so.

Jesus contradicts the notion that certain people should be outsiders by associating with unacceptable people, sinners and outcasts (Mt 9:10-13). When the Pharisees criticize him for dining with tax collectors and other people without status, Jesus replies that he has come not to call respectable people, but outcasts. By his actions, even more than by his words, he demonstrates that tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, children, women have access to God's word and power. They have more than mere access: they have experiences that open them to God's power.

In terms of their religious roles, the gospel underscores a movement of women from the background and the periphery to a more central,

though still somewhat hidden, position. Though women do not play a large role in the teaching discourses that shape the heart of Matthew's perspective, the genealogy reveals the critical role that women play even as outsiders (Mt 1:1–17). Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, all foreigners, 'sinners', or otherwise unconventional exemplars, contribute not just to the ancestry of Jesus but to the salvation of the Jewish nation.

Despite Matthew's somewhat conservative attempt to address his Jewish audience he astounds the listener by using a woman not only to teach, but to teach Jesus. He places the teaching woman not in the traditional discourses but in a new setting at the table where she may yet get to eat. At first, Jesus rebuffs the Syro-Phoenician woman who asks him to heal her daughter by responding that the dogs do not deserve to eat the children's food (Mt 15:21–28). She refuses to take no for an answer. She may be an outsider but she understands with a special insight. She stretches his thinking by turning his own metaphor over with 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table'. She is heard, and she is commended.

Matthew's Gospel does not succeed in presenting women clearly as equals of men, but it moves in that direction. Jesus' statements on divorce (Mt 5:27–32, 19:3–10) and on the status of women as possessions of men (Mt 22:23–33) shift the focus from the social and religious rights of men over women into a sphere of mutual respect and equality. Nevertheless, women remain in a paradoxical position as outsiders who are theoretically 'inside' the community of faith and who from that vantage point sometimes see what others miss.<sup>5</sup>

*The politically and socially excluded*

To do justice to the presence of the marginalized in all the gospels and to recognize the unique contribution of each of the evangelists, we can turn finally to some of the examples of outsiders in John's Gospel. Besides the physical, economic and religious forms of exclusion already noted, several other types of political and social exclusion appear. The prologue to John's Gospel states that Jesus came to his own country, but his own people did not accept him (Jn 1:11). By association and implication his followers were also to be rejected (Jn 15:18–21). The Jews regarded the Samaritans as political, social and religious outsiders (Jn 4) and in order to marginalize Jesus they referred to him in association with them (Jn 8:48). Women, too, were outsiders in a variety of ways (Jn 4, 8:1–11, 12:1–8) as has already been noted. Several of these themes of exclusion converge as John creates a distinctive framework to deal with the insider/outsider gap.

John's Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus as the Word of God, introduces a metaphor for overcoming outsider status. Jesus the Word engages in dialogue with those who would have been excluded from the conversations with insiders. He converses with his disciples, with Samaritans, with a woman caught in adultery, with a paralysed man and a blind man, with Greeks. Questioning and dialogue provide a means to highlight exclusion and at the same time to begin the process of overcoming it.

Early in John's Gospel when Jesus begins to attract followers, Jesus decides to go to Galilee with Philip who then calls Nathanael to follow Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:43–51). Nathanael asks whether anything good can come from Nazareth, highlighting the marginal status of Jesus himself. Through a dialogue in which he reveals his understanding of Nathanael, Jesus suggests how marginal status may give a person access to knowledge unknown to others. As the gospel continues, the interplay between Jerusalem and Galilee frames the conflict between insiders and outsiders (Jn 7:1).

One of the most developed accounts of the place of outsiders in John's Gospel occurs in Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4). She who was an outsider as a Samaritan, a woman, and a person of dubious marital status enters into dialogue with Jesus regarding the variety of ways she and her people are excluded from recognition by the influential. As an outsider she desires inclusion and salvation. Although her understanding of their conversation is at first literal, her spiritual thirst as one who is marginalized enables her to recognize in his message the fulfilment of her quest.

The Samaritan woman at the well understands the way that Jews perceive outsiders and the unacceptability of their worship. She makes sure she tells Jesus she understands: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that Jerusalem is the place where men [sic] ought to worship'. Since she understands this much, Jesus can lead her further, saying it is the time 'when the true worshipper will worship the Father in spirit and truth'. Her dialogue with him, testimony to her ability to add insight to insight, contrasts with the dialogues Jesus has with men in John's Gospel.<sup>6</sup>

Like the other gospels, John's Gospel has no shortage of outsiders looking for their place in society. Jesus, by building a community of followers and entering into conversation with them, offers a tangible way for them to become insiders in the best sense of the word. His method of dealing with outsiders invites us to dialogue in imagination and in fact with the marginalized to see what they can teach us about our own lives and values.

*Conclusion*

The four ways the marginalized appear in the gospels, as described above, should not suggest that we can understand the experience of being an outsider through single categories. Those who are marginalized generally experience their status as outsiders in multiple ways. Such was the case with Jesus himself. Recognizing this prevents us from labelling as outsiders people who are excluded only partially or superficially. It teaches us that multiple exclusions of real outsiders make them especially vulnerable.

The truths that the marginalized are able to perceive derive in no small way from their recognition of the complex interrelatedness of their vulnerability and need for one another, not to mention their need for God. Being an outsider makes a person vulnerable, but the very fact of vulnerability provides a context for greater awareness of dependence and interdependence.

The marginalized perceive what cannot ordinarily be perceived if one is at the centre of a sphere of influence. They know first of all that self-created security is an illusion. Jesus tries to convey this in his parable of the rich fool who builds bigger barns instead of sharing his resources and who dies without the joy of giving (Lk 12:16-21).

The marginalized also know their deepest identity cannot come from wealth, health, social status or religious structures. These can be part of the good things of life, but they are transitory and enjoyed to the fullest only when they are not obtained by excluding others. Ultimately, one's most unshakable identity comes from God's unconditional acceptance and a sense of somehow being part of a larger whole. When outsiders want to be insiders without being part of a larger whole, they usually want to displace those at the centre of control. This is not the way of the gospels. The way that Jesus invites outsiders in from the margins focuses more on dialogue and listening and being made part of a larger whole.

The uniquely Christian way of being an insider, though it has often been distorted into exclusive salvation, has more to do with equality in discipleship than with a dualism of acceptability/non-acceptability. Against this background, however, a Christian can never quite give up outsider status. When it comes to advocating for the marginalized who lack a voice, Christians find themselves having to identify with outsiders to claim for and with the disenfranchised what they have a right to as members of a human society. The follower of Jesus is invited to work for and with outsiders to become insiders but to remain outside of the privileges like control and superiority that often accompany insider status.

In describing women as a Society of Outsiders dedicated to the abolition of war, Virginia Woolf touched upon some of the qualities Christians might adopt in retaining what is of value in being an outsider. She advocates honest work, rejection of tyranny, the end of greed and competition, the fostering of freedom, the creative and critical examination of religion, all of which require one to stand aside from privilege and coercive power. An outsiders' society in a religious context would, according to Woolf, 'free the religious spirit from its present servitude'.<sup>7</sup> To what is it enslaved? To the desire to be a Society of Insiders who have the answers and no longer need to look at the world from a vulnerable position.

What we have to learn from outsiders touches our deepest fears and hopes. The marginalized teach us first by asking us to face our fears and hopes. Where do you get your security? Can you listen to perspectives other than your own? Are you vulnerable enough to hear the good news? Do you know how fragile your life is? Do you have the will to build a society in which all voices can be heard? Can you still think and live as an outsider when you have become an insider? What we learn from studying outsiders in the gospels is that in some way they were able to experience God and hear the good news as others were not. As 'insiders' learn to enter into genuine conversation with 'outsiders' they too may find God present again in their midst.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kirby, Sandra and McKenna, Kate, *Experience, research, and social change: methods from the margins* (Toronto: Garaband Press, 1989), p 33.

<sup>2</sup> Meier, John, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp 7-9.

<sup>3</sup> Malina, Bruce, *The New Testament world: insights from cultural anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), pp 71-75.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, Victor, and Benjamin, Don, 'The leper', *The Bible Today* (September 1991), pp 292-297.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Kopas, 'Jesus and women in Matthew', *Theology Today* (April 1990), pp 13-21.

<sup>6</sup> Karris, Robert, *Jesus and the marginalized in John's Gospel* (Collegeville MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1990), p 75, observes that the roles of women in John's Gospel reveal the community's attempt to attract and retain women followers by helping them move from outsider to insider status. It is questionable how long this was effective. See also, Jane Kopas, 'Jesus and women: John's Gospel', *Theology Today* (July 1984), pp 201-205.

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, Virginia, *Three guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), p 113.