

# celebrated **W.A.T.C.H.** women

Women And The Church

## ISABELLA GILMORE 1842-1923

*Isabella Gilmore was ordained deaconess on April 16th (her day in the new calendar) 1887. She was 45.*

**W**idowed at the age of 40 and childless, she then trained as a nurse at Guy's Hospital, still unusual work for a middle-class woman to do. Although asked to become head Deaconess in the diocese of Rochester by its bishop, she was at first reluctant: since 1884 she had been as mother to the eight orphaned children of her brother Randall (but later she still managed to be there for them in her busy new career). Furthermore, she was not theologically trained and knew nothing of the deaconess order. But in the end it was God who called. It was during morning service at the end of October 1886 – “it was just as if God's voice had called me, and the intense rest and joy were beyond words.”

She was not the first deaconess in the Church of England, but at her memorial service Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had known Isabella well when he was Bishop of Rochester, predicted “Some day, those who know best will be able to trace much of the origins and roots of (the) revival (of the deaconess order) to the life, work, example and word of Isabella Gilmore.”

### Why?

Because, dissatisfied with the model offered her in the deaconess communities both in this country and on the continent, she insisted that the deaconess, rather than being part of a religious-style community based in a mother house, should be part of the parish system, working with local clergy and licensed by the diocesan Bishop, thus opening the way for the women incumbents of today. She also insisted that the training should not only include nursing, cooking, housework and practical needlework, but theological training, lectures and essays.

The call was to ministry, and a ministry of an intensely practical kind – “a curiously effective combination of nurse, social worker and amateur policeman” (*Fiona McCarthy, William Morris*) but more than that...The deaconesses also taught and prayed and prepared people for baptism. They moved through the poorest parishes in South London, loved and respected by all, and the local clergy came to value their work.

Isabella and the Church of England at the time regarded the deaconess as the female equivalent of the male deacon. At her ordination, a male colleague remarked, “Now you are one of us.” It was only later that the church got cold feet and reneged on this, relegating the deaconess order to a strange half-way house. Isabella lived to see the order spread far across the Anglican Communion. She was herself involved in preparation for the Pan Anglican Congress of 1908 and her presentation on the deaconess order led to a surge in vocations.



### So what was she like?

She was sternly practical. When she bought the house on North Side, Clapham Common – later to be named Gilmore House in her memory – it was she who sorted the drains, getting rid of lingering odours. The house remained as a theological college training women for ministry until 1970.

She was a stern disciplinarian and a bit of a workaholic, expecting a lot of her students – one who said she was going to bed early because she was tired was told to “work it off.” The deaconess was dedicated to a life-long vocation. Only single women and widows need apply. No jewelry was to be worn except, where appropriate, a wedding ring. Isabella herself on the eve of her ordination had to relinquish her rings – it was a struggle. “One moment, and then I threw them into a drawer in my writing table – then think of God's love! I never remembered

them for a week and then all pain was gone.” The rings remain to this day around the stem of the Gilmore House chalice.

Photos of head Deaconess Gilmore are all stern and unsmiling. But that was not how she really was. Students and parishioners alike speak of her kindness – warm and unsentimental. She thoroughly enjoyed mixing in with all classes, full of robust good humour, shrewd and not easily taken in. Her brother, the famous William Morris commented wistfully, “I preach socialism, you practise it.” Such was Isabella’s real love for the poor. But unlike him, she was not politically involved, not a major questioner of the status-quo.

Isabella Gilmore was used to men’s company and always got on well with them. She was never afraid of them. She had no Victorian father figure in her life, her own father dying when she was 5. But five well-loved brothers and a very happy marriage to Arthur Gilmore had given her an easy and comradely approach to the opposite sex. Without exception, the male clergy respected Isabella and she was on wonderfully good terms with three different successive Bishops of Rochester.

Brought up in an Evangelical household with a strong Puritan streak, Isabella came later to appreciate and value other traditions; certainly, churchmanship was with her no big deal.

Sane, holistic and plain – that was her spirituality. What you saw, you got. God always came first, and she loved people. “I think as our work becomes more and more part of ourselves, and I trust closer to God, we speak less about it. It has become part of our very life, and the works of love and mercy put day by day into our hands are as natural to us as the air we breathe and the food we eat.”

It was the result of hard work, discipline and love. Her memorial is in the south transept of Southwark Cathedral and also in today’s women in parochial ministry.

### **Janet Vout**

(See *Isabella Gilmore, Sister to William Morris* by Janet Grierson, SPCK 1962)

