

keynote address

KEYNOTE ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE WATCH AGM 3 November 2007
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A HALF CHANGED CHURCH

Never mind Gordon Ramsay, we have in modern society a new F-word: Feminism. In recent years, Feminism, the sensibility that argues for the equality and freedom of women, has done its job and is now disowned by women who benefited from it. Many women begin sentences with "I'm not a feminist but...". Particularly Christian women.

But the fact is that we have benefited from feminism whether we like it or not. The Church, needless to say, is a little anxious.

The parish gets a new priest. It's the first time they've had a woman. The two church wardens are a bit stuck because in the past they've always taken the new vicar out fishing for a day. "Will she like fishing?" they wonder, but trying to be new men, and not wishing to patronise, they invite her as they have done all her male predecessors. The day comes and the new vicar arrives. They take her to the lake and get into the boat. After a while, fishing in the centre of the lake, the vicar says "Actually I'm a bit cold, I think I'll have to go back to the car and get my coat". She gets out of the boat, walks across the water, gets her coat, walks back and climbs back into the boat. One church warden says to the other "Typical woman – always forgetting something".

Feminism bores most people – even raising questions about the representation of women is met with groans and derision. It's old hat at best, and at worst it's the source of all our ills. In that bastion of the views of Middle England, the Daily Mail, some years ago, Callum Brown's book *The Death of Christian Britain* was the basis for an article which blamed feminism – or more specifically women in general – for the decline in faith in 21st century UK. I had a particular interest in this because the article was illustrated by a distressingly large picture of me – although I thankfully wasn't identified as the sole reason for the decline of Christianity in the West...

Feminism is, these days, if you'll pardon the pun – a whipping boy. The fact that women have more choice in our society is blamed for family breakdown, delinquency and violence of children, the fact that children watch too much television because their mothers are out at work, the increase of divorce, and a crisis in male identity. Men are no longer in sole control, mothers are not what they used to be, and it's all the fault of women gaining more say over their bodies, their choices, their money and their careers.

The role and identity of women and men is at least as much governed by fictions and narratives, myths and beliefs as it is by legal, economic and political arrangements. If we take these categories – law, economics and politics – we find that in the UK, 89% of high court judges are men, 97% of FTSE 100 chief executives are men and 80% of MPs. At current rates of change, it would take 40 years to achieve equality in the judiciary, 60 years to achieve equality in business and a staggering 200 years to achieve equal representation of women and men in parliament. Until women are consecrated bishop, there is no representation in the leadership of the established church. Apart from all the theological arguments, this absence damages our mission and our communication with the society in which we are embedded.

But cultural narratives, religious myths and roles are just as powerful as these seriously imbalanced areas of public life in defining who women are and what they do. The underlying beliefs about "what women are like" and therefore what is appropriate behaviour for them, underpins much of our discussions today about parenting, underachieving boys at school, binge drinking young women and predatory sexual behaviour. Even the recent smoking ban produced new reflections on the relationships between women and men: smirking was born – that is, people who go outside the pub for a cigarette and flirt over the nicotine. Campaigners also warned women that if they leave a club to have a cigarette, the incidence of date rape drugs being mixed with their unguarded drinks was higher.

Christian women in the media have recently made a bit of an impact. Jewellery has been the presenting issue: the BA employee who fought for the right to wear a cross, and the school pupil who wanted to wear a chastity ring. Brave Christian women do from time to time have a voice in the public square but so far it hasn't been very authoritative.

One of the main reasons for this is that the media, particularly television and radio, focus on bishops for the comments on the issues of the day. The profile of our two archbishops is arguably higher than it has been for years – and the speaking out of John Sentamu over Zimbabwe, or Rowan Williams over the quality of our children's childhoods is vital engagement. Where are the women of faith who speak in this way? Perhaps the most articulate is Rabbi Julia Neuberger who speaks for the Kings Fund on health issues or Yasmin Alibhai Brown who speaks from a

Muslim perspective on citizenship, and cultural identity. From a Christian perspective, women's comments from a faith perspective are less on public policy than domestic issues: Sister Wendy on art, Sister Frances Dominica and Cecily Saunders RIP on dying and death. The Christianity of Ann Widdecombe and Ruth Kelly, who do make and comment on policy, has been a parallel concern alongside their main political focus.

I'd like to suggest that there are more talks given on the subject of masculinity in Christianity too. For too long, and still from the majority of pulpits in every denomination, theology from a white, straight, male perspective is presented not as itself, but as the normative theology that all of us are expected to sign up to.

It is an obvious thing to say, but gender does not always mean female, ethnicity does not always mean black or brown and sexuality does not always mean gay. These perspectives serve to give voice to what has been historically silenced by another gendered, ethnically and sexually specific perspective; that is still presented as "normal": that of a white heterosexual male. It is not my place to suggest an agenda for this set of reflections, but it might include looking at fatherhood, or the growing and worrying prominence given to sexual crime in the media, in programmes such as CSI, which labels men as violent perpetrators as much as it stereotypes women as victims.

But back to women:

A friend of mine who is a high-flying advertising executive, told me of a conversation she heard between her father and her son. Her 12 year old said: "When I grow up I want to have a big job like Daddy". The fact is that Daddy does indeed have a big job: but she heard her father say to his grandson: "that's great Joe: do you know that Mummy has a big job too?"

"No she doesn't" he said, "she looks after us". Her father persevered: "Do you know that Mummy goes out to work too? Who do you think earns more money Mummy or Daddy?"

Joe thought for a moment: Daddy of course.

His grandfather then told him that Mummy did in fact earn twice as much as Daddy, and although this wasn't the most important thing in the world, he could perhaps factor those kinds of things in when he was thinking about his parents. My friend was moved by this conversation and also it made her think hard. She juggles her job so that she is more often than not there to pick her children up from school: even if she's had to get the plane back from Zurich to do so. Despite her best efforts, and perhaps also because of them, she and her husband are inadvertently modelling to their son and daughter a highly traditional picture of a mother who is at home baking cakes (which she also does brilliantly) and a father who goes out and has a big job.

When her husband looks after the children, he is babysitting or helping, and she finds herself thanking him. It doesn't occur to him that he is simply looking after his own children: he is helping her out or doing her a favour. She recognises in herself the *Married Lone Parent* syndrome as one newspaper has called it; where both partners work but the woman still takes responsibility for children and house.

This is a churchgoing family where both parents would be absolutely clear about the equality between women and men and where both highly educated people are trying to build a family life that is progressive and Christian.

Women in the UK in the 21st century are living with an enormous sense of guilt and not a little confusion. Guilt, as the columnist Erma Bombeck called it, is the "gift that just keeps on giving".

- A stay at home Mum feels guilt that she feels bored by full time childcare.
- A working Mum feels guilt that she misses the school sports day.
- A working single or married woman feels guilt that she is somehow "selfish" by opting not to have children.
- A lesbian couple feel guilty about paying for sperm to have a child.
- A woman who discovers she can't have children feels guilty as she struggles to feel female enough for a society still enthralled by the role of the mother.

Erma Bombeck *At Wit's End* 1960s' column regarding women's roles/feminism wrote about feeling guilty about working - and being a Mum at the same time: "As long as my husband smelled his bath towel and looked like he had just seen God, I felt I was allowed to pursue a career for another week." The guilt is pervasive and it's there for most of the women I speak to in varying life circumstances.

And in the 21st century, in the West, women have more freedom and choice than at any time in our history. There are very few areas of public life that are technically closed to women; we are airline pilots, politicians, astronauts, lawyers, mechanics, builders, football club owners. The only areas of public life still closed to women are those protected by organised religion.

Articles are written in the broadsheet newspapers about the status of women in British society, what are the current issues and who are the role models. This of course is nothing new: back in 1915 the writer Edith Wharton commented: "What a woman was criticised for doing yesterday she is ridiculed for not doing today". Or to put it another way, sometimes it feels like everything is forbidden until it becomes compulsory.

Feminism, the named sensibility that tried to empower women has become a dirty word. Many women of all walks of life start sentences with "I'm not a feminist but...".

Media give us strong messages about beauty – particularly about youth. Consider the recent row over Anna Ford being replaced by Sophie Rayworth on the BBC’s lunchtime news.

And it’s a good time to be talking about this not least because men are next: there is an increase in the number of young men with bulimia or anorexia, an increase in the number taking steroids when they work out. We have the so-called feminisation of football with players such as David Beckham and Rio Ferdinand being models as well as sportsmen.

We’re living in interesting times with regards to women – not least in the Church and how we relate to society. In the General Synod debate recently on women bishops the Bishop of Durham criticised what he saw as “vague intentions to keep in touch with modern culture”. This I think most men and women in the church would agree with. But the fact is that it is part of the mission of the church to read the signs of the times, to practise discernment, to cultivate wisdom. Christian women and Christian women leaders have something to contribute, not just to the church’s internal debates on what women are allowed to do – but to the wider debate in the society we serve.

I have not subscribed to the quip that the church is being dragged into the 21st century – of course we are on one level – but also, I do believe that by having a serious debate on gender, we are able to speak about what society thinks it’s resolved but hasn’t.

American writer Peggy Orenstein calls it a “half changed world”. Old patterns and expectations have broken down, but new ideas seem fragmentary, unrealistic and often contradictory (*Flux*, Orenstein).

And women clergy take our place in this state of flux – and we will be open to the same ridicule that other groups are.

Women clergy have found a place in British society and we are learning to be priests in our own way. We are only just beginning to see the difference we are making and the possibilities that a whole priesthood offers to the people of God. In a million pastoral encounters it will have mattered to someone that the priest they sought out was female. The receptiveness of women combined with our authority as priests has made a compelling combination in parishes throughout the country.

But lest we fall into the trap of stereotyping women – “they make such good pastors” – let me quickly say that women’s gifts are as varied and variable as men’s. Women are, thank God, living out their priestly vocation in parishes, hospitals, prisons, schools, in their own workplaces, in cathedrals and in the administrative structures of the institutional church. We are pastors,

prophets, visionaries, administrators; we are theologians, healers, preachers and teachers.

In these first twelve years Christian women and Christian women leaders are learning to exercise authority which comes only from God but is expressed in a way that fuses profundity and practicality.

“Unleavened bread was first eaten by slaves on the run and the cup of wine is a cup of suffering. Just as (I believe) bread and wine are transformed, so we are transformed...into people of compassion, people who see what others overlook, people who can begin to trace the vague outlines of the prophetic vision of the reign of God where justice and mercy embrace and a grand table is set. Where bankers sit next to farmers, border guards converse with the undocumented and ranchers share toasts with environmentalists. Where work gloves lie next to linen napkins, hands are scrubbed, feet are washed, thirst is quenched, hunger satisfied and there’s no hint of injustice, no whisper of enslavement...no sign of barbed wire anywhere.”

James Schmitmeyer (*Liturgy and Justice* ed. Anne Y. Koestner p 73)

That is the inheritance of the Wisdom tradition: Wisdom – she who stands at the crossroads (Proverbs 8) and calls for justice.

In as much as Jesus himself spun tales of robbers and kings, weddings and wars to show us God’s presence in the world, we too hold the fabric of society in all its complexity before our loving God. Every day without ceasing.

“There are two women of justice. One with a scale and her eyes blinded, and the other, who proclaims ‘God has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things but the rich he has sent empty away’.

“In a liturgy that rehearses justice, leaders are servants, all have fallen short, all are children of God and just relationships are rehearsed and modelled in the ritual.”

John Donahue, *What does the Lord Require?* p 28

In the Church we imagine in the eucharist, there is no hint of injustice, no whisper of enslavement...And no sign of barbed wire. Anywhere.

Authority and Seniority

Virginia Woolf highlighted the gap in economic and social independence that denied women a “room of one’s own” to think, to read, to write. Now women clergy have a study; but they might not shut themselves in it very often, particularly if they are the primary carer for their children.

Enlightened preaching rotas include the school half term. The pressure of fulfilling dual roles of public priest and domestic goddess meet in the lives of women clergy; we not only open the fete, we are often asked to bake a cake for the Mothers Union stall. These expectations raise enormous questions not only for women but for our male colleagues about work/life balance, about the structure of work itself, and our respective roles in society. Priests who are women are uniquely placed to contribute a theological perspective to this wider debate.

Christian women, lay and ordained, have a message of dignity to offer to other women and to men; that we are created in the image of God. Women can be signs of change – an affirmation that things do not always have to be as they are.

In Holy Land Ramallah, Jean Zaru remarks that there, women are not, as in the old Chinese proverb, holding up half the sky – they are holding up the *whole* sky as male unemployment soars above 70% and women struggle to teach their sons the ways of peace. Rise of female suicide bombers is for Jean a betrayal not only of the non-violent principles that she as a Quaker wants to aspire to, but also a betrayal of woman's unique role in bringing life into the world.

Jean Zaru argues that Palestinians cannot be free without women's liberation. She says that women nourish relationships in structures. It's not enough to be saluted; it must be part of decision making layers of the church.

She is Presiding Clerk of the Quakers in Ramallah – the only woman religious leader in the area. The reason she says she is in this position is because unlike other religious leadership positions, it's a voluntary position and you actually do most of the work.

I would like to suggest that the presence of women in the decision making layers of the church could have a significant effect on the theology and ecclesiology and therefore the mission of the church in society.

Women who reflect on the gender critique available to them when looking at the institution may help to move the church from an overemphasis on Christology towards a more Trinitarian understanding of God; and this may help us in our communication with the rest of society.

Christology

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the key figure. Of course.

Feminist theologian and Biblical scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether encourages us not to indulge in Christolatry; by that she means an over-emphasis on the one man Jesus to the exclusion of God the Creator or the Holy Spirit. Also we must try to avoid an over-emphasis on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was male.

If we have a faith and a theology that is so focussed on that one man, verging towards the heresy that Jesus was not in an umbilical spiritual relationship with God, then we lose some of the distinctive and precious elements of Christianity.

The theology of "one man" leads us to a model of church – ecclesiology – that is an ever-diminishing triangle – up to God on a throne.

"Father knows best". One bishop at the head.

This feeds also, in our own age, into the cult of celebrity and individualism.

A greater emphasis on the Trinity produces a different model of church because it expands as it goes up rather than contracts.

What does this mean for leadership? It doesn't mean leadership by committee (!). Jesus didn't say "Where shall we go?" He said "Follow me".

But it does mean a sense of interdependence and a theological rationale for collaborative and consultative style of leadership.

There can still be room for decisions made by an individual leader as well as decisions made by groups; it means that other voices are heard and are given weight in the shaping of direction and vision. Women often describe themselves as being at the centre rather than the top. (*The Web of Women's Leadership*, Susan Willhauck, Abingdon Press 2001)

Women in authority

- are in intimate relationship with God
- are carrying the gospel truth that life follows death
- are outward looking (Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene; are sent out as apostles)
- are pointing towards the truth of God revealed in Jesus.

We are embedded in the structures but there are huge dangers associated with this. There are points where women's participation in an unchanged institution becomes more talismanic than prophetic; a reinforcing presence rather than a catalyst for Godly change. This happens when we do not claim the freedom we have as women to be ourselves and to be priests. In a hierarchical and patriarchal institution, women are just as capable as men of infantilising congregations for example, or not encouraging other women, or not recognising the profound differences between women and rejoicing in that variety. If we are not careful, we can play Peter to another's Jesus – "I don't recognise you, we are not part of the same enterprise".

We pray for wisdom to discern these undercurrents, and for grace never simply to be chaplains to the status quo.

The Christian Church has for centuries had a problem with “ungoverned female energy” (*Six Myths*, Marina Warner, p 7). It is a feature of all world faiths that part of the apparatus of religion pertains specifically to women and their treatment and behaviour. As an agent of social control, Christianity in the West has been very effective in confining and controlling women’s energy and sexuality. Notable and famous exceptions stand out from the crowd, but the fact remains that millions of voiceless women have lived and died being taught by male Christian leaders that they were responsible for all the sin in the world. It’s all about Eve. She was the one who was taken in by the serpent and she tempted her man away from his higher calling.

Because of this, Christian women have had a mountain to climb. From their invisibility in the Scriptures to the clear teaching of their responsibility for sin, there have been limited options for women to find ways to express their faith in Jesus Christ and their passion for making the world a better place. In reality of course, in contradiction to St Paul, women have always taught men: mothers have taught their sons the Lord’s Prayer, and have within the home, often been the prime arbiter of right and wrong when guiding their children. Women have therefore exercised power in a hidden and unacknowledged way.

Women – and men – are called to mirror the action of God in the world, by being at the moment of our birth at once absolutely free and bound in the service of others: this we can do in leadership, motherhood, in relationship, in priesthood, in the world of work and at home.

This fundamental Christian principle, following Jesus in giving of ourselves freely for the sake of others, has arguably been a bankrupt one for women over centuries of Christianity. For women, for centuries in the West and for millions of women now, this service, this binding has been imposed and not chosen.

Christian women will no longer be unwillingly confined by the fear of our own sexuality and nature – our society and religion’s structure should not be governed by a need for social control of women. We are governed only by the freedom that God gives to be ourselves.

A distinctive Christian women’s contribution to the current debates in society might look like this:

First: confidence in our bodies: we are made in the image and likeness of God; we know ourselves and we will tell others – there was no mistake in Creation when you were made.

Second: a sense that sacrifice is not a dirty word, even though it might be incomprehensible to a self-satisfied society. A conviction that when it is chosen freely, we witness to the love of God for all humanity.

Third: an open hearted refusal to be defined solely by our

sexual activity; for example in the old lectionary, the women saints were often described as Virgin and Martyr; whereas a male saint, like St Paul for example, was not associated with the concept of virginity even though in his writing he has a clear bias towards the single life.

Fourth: a real commitment to the mystical selves we know that we are; a celebration of our earthy connection to the irreducible truth and joy of being alive; and our commitment to holistic lifestyles and awakening the spirits of the children in our care.

Fifth: a sense that our autonomy as women, our bravery, our vision, our energy, our desire, is realised when we are mutually dependent upon one another in community.

When Rosa Parks reused to give her seat on the bus to a white man in Alabama in 1955, she said “The only tired I was, was tired of giving in”.

The need for our half-changed world to change further is urgent. Christian women can play our part in imagining what this changed world might be like. We can tell our daughters and our sons that things do not have to be as they are.

For almost all of Christian history, from the suppression of the gospel of Mary Magdalene, to the 2nd century martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions – from the medieval denouncement of mystics as heretics to the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, from the first women preachers in the radical sects of the 17th century to the campaigners for social justice of the 19th, women have been speaking and praying from a situation of marginalisation as far as church authority is concerned. This is a vital concept for us to grasp. The experience of marginalisation didn’t stop women speaking, in fact it energised them and gave them a voice to critique the church and state run exclusively by men. In this nation, millions of women have lived and died over centuries believing because of the teaching of the church that they were responsible for all the sin in the world, believing that they were not worthy to speak publicly about their faith, believing that their rightful place was in un-chosen sacrifice hidden from public view especially in religious communities.

Now women are on the inside, are exercising authority in state and church, although the power is not yet equally shared and the pay is certainly not equal. We are in a new situation; I am not here to make a case for women to be bishops – that case is obvious – but I am here to say that a world view that accords women the public authority and respect that is consonant with one made in the image of God, is one that women and men can take on. And it is a world view that will insist, wherever we are and in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, that the pernicious temptation to dominate, to cling to whatever power we have, to act out of our fear of change, is challenged.

We live in a half changed world and a half changed church.

On a global scale, this changed world would be a world in which there is no rape anywhere.

It is a world where no girl or woman is sold or trafficked for sex.

It is a world where all women can read and write and express the secrets of their souls.

It is a world where girls know that their bodies are beautiful as they are.

It is a world where no woman is cut open to enlarge her breasts, or to stretch her face or to be circumcised.

It is a world where a woman alone in the dark feels safe.

It is a world where women's words and laughter, delight and grief and desire is shared freely in the service of others.

It is a world where the wisdom of ancient women in Scripture is prized and honoured, where the authority of women is celebrated and recognised, where the truth of the creation of women made in the image of God is given worldly expression in the teaching and structures of the Church.

From the historical perspective of exclusion, women are able to speak with authority from long centuries of marginalisation, to bring these perspectives into the decision making structures of society and church.

It may seem an odd thing to say in a Church gathering, but over the centuries, because women have had to *find* ways to speak about their faith *without* the authority of the church, women visionaries sit more lightly to that authority. I have just done a series at St Paul's Cathedral about women's contribution to the Christian tradition and in researching women mystics, theologians, musicians, campaigners and visionaries I discovered that a common theme was that women have written and spoken about the need to be less dogmatic, not more. The musicians found new ways of chanting and writing melody, the theologians, mystics and visionaries write about the flexibility and spirit-led holistic principles of their work, with no less rigour but perhaps with a little less dogma.

When we are looking for clues to our future then we should let go a little of the expectations of our exclusively male hierarchical past and look outside the church

structures for women who make significant contributions to the way faith is interpreted; we will sit a little more lightly to concepts of heresy and orthodoxy and listen to those visionary writers who have been hurt by Christianity like Jeanette Winterson, those who reflect on the place of faith as part of the cultural mix in modern urban Britain like Zadie Smith, those who refused to accept the received wisdom of business like Anita Roddick, or those who speak powerfully about the effect of a modern image driven society on our psyche and our brain like Professor Susan Greenfield.

Christian women, campaigning for the greater inclusion of women in the hierarchy of the church can still claim the freedom that sits more lightly to the boundaries that a patriarchal history or a hierarchical present imposes. The past will not define our future.

Over centuries, women have of course made a huge contribution to the Christian tradition – much of it hidden, and in the home. Perhaps a good metaphor for all of our hidden women is Susannah Wesley who taught her sons Charles and John to sing. But in a society where women are increasingly able to play a public role in politics, the law, medicine, business and commerce, there is now a new voice for women to claim the power to define along with men, the direction of our society.

In the West, we live in a half changed world. There are now very few areas of public life not open to women – except those protected by organised religion. The old assumptions have been overturned but it is not yet clear what they are to be replaced with. Christianity has a contribution to make to this public debate, and it doesn't behove Christian women or men to repeat a kind of retro-feminism that bemoans the fact that things are not how they used to be. For the sake of our young women and men who are surrounded by a greedy consumer-led culture, we have a duty to search ceaselessly for the gift of imaginative prayerful vision. Through writing, speaking, teaching, singing, leading, encouraging and above all, loving, women will play their part together with men, in bringing to birth nothing less than a world not just half changed, but changed beyond our wildest dreams.

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