

PRIESTHOOD & GENDER

a reworking by WATCH of the original MOW pamphlet "Jesus and Gender" by the Revd Dr Jonathan Inkipin

Women have been ordained as priests in the Church of England since 1994. They have been priested in many other parts of the Anglican Communion for much longer. Indeed it is more than 55 years since Li Tim-Oi was ordained as the first woman priest by Bishop Hall in southern China in 1944. Yet there are still people who find it hard to accept the fact that women *can* be priests. One argument used, which may seem trivial to many people but is serious and important for others, is the fact that Jesus was *male* and only chose *men* to be his apostles and therefore women cannot be priests. This argument is pressed further by those who say that the priest at the Eucharist represents Christ and so only *men* can be priests as only *male* human beings can be true representatives of the male Christ. This pamphlet tries to explain some of these issues.

Men and women in the body of Christ

Does it matter that Jesus was a man and not a woman?

To be born at all, Jesus had to be either male or female. At the time he was born it would have been much more difficult for a woman to have travelled around, preached and gathered a following. Jesus was male and this made his ministry possible for him in the time that he lived. However, the fact that Jesus was born a male is in itself of no more theological significance than the other characteristics with which he was born – his Jewish nationality, his age, his skin colour – so this should not be used as a means of excluding people from ordained ministry.

It has been said that gender is different, more fundamental. Even if this is the case, it is still less important that Jesus was a *male*, than that he was a *human being* – that he was of our flesh, our *human flesh*, not specifically *male* flesh. If too great importance is given to the male gender of Jesus then the suggestion may follow that women cannot be Christ-like – indeed cannot be “saved”. Even those opposed to women priests believe that Jesus saves us all, redeems us all, and that women can become Christ-like just as men can.

Some argue that the maleness of Jesus was essential and follows from the scriptures. He is to God his Father what Isaac was to Abraham. He is another Joseph, the Son of David and like Hosea, the bridegroom of the faithless bride. To claim this is to claim that what happens to be recorded in the Hebrew scriptures and the typology which has been built upon it, is necessary to salvation rather than useful in establishing the *significance* of Jesus for *all* people.

It has also been claimed that *the maleness of Jesus is integral to the narrative of the Gospels*. It is claimed that it is impossible to rewrite that tale with a woman as the principle protagonist without altering its significance. In a sense this is true as the Jesus presented by the Gospel writers as the Jesus of faith was a person who had lived his life as a male human being. This does not prove that the good news of God’s redemption could *never* have been revealed in a woman nor does it prove that because the revelation came through a male human being, female human beings are excluded from that salvation. God’s purpose and possibilities are way beyond our understanding of the Gospel story as we have it.

In our Bible and in our central acts of worship, we speak as a church of God’s love for *all* people: none of whom has a special privilege in God’s eyes, all of whom who stand in equal need of God’s saving grace.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians we are told “For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 27-28).

In the baptism service (ASB) we declare “We are members together of the body of Christ; we are children of the same heavenly Father, we are inheritors together of the same kingdom of God”.

Men *and* women are saved in the Christ Jesus; men *and* women are “heirs of God’s promise”, the Body of Christ here on earth: men *and* women must share together in the work of Christ’s body in the church today.

The priesthood of all believers

Women and men share in that priesthood through Baptism

In his first epistle Peter wrote, “Come to him, a living stone.....and let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”.

This royal priesthood with its commission to worship and spread the Gospel was open to all who were baptised – women as well as men.

The sacramental priesthood

Has it not always been confined to men? Is this not because Jesus chose twelve men as his apostles and they laid hands on others to take their place?

The twelve were indeed all men, but Jesus was surrounded by a much larger group of disciples, many of whom were women. Notable amongst these was Mary Magdalene who was the first witness of the resurrection and whom Augustine called the “apostle to the apostles”. There were other women as well – Mary, Martha, Joanna, Susannah and many others.

Clearly men were much better placed in Jewish society at that time to spread the good news, but Jesus never turned women an way from him nor discouraged them from listening to his teaching. Rather Jesus’ *attitude* to women was *revolutionary* for his day.

If we are to follow the direction in which the life and ministry of Jesus points us, we must show equal compassion and respect to the needs and gifts of women of our own age. We must pay more attention to the radical new value that Jesus placed upon women in his own society and less to the fact that the twelve apostles happened to be male.

In the early church as we read in Acts of Apostles and the Epistles, the ministries of the church developed gradually and the first to emerge was the ministry of deacons. Women were deaconesses (Phoebe was actually described as a deacon), teachers of the Gospel, prophetesses and martyrs.

Although bishops, presbyters and deacons were found in some churches in the New Testament, the full ministry of bishops and priests developed after New Testament times. The concept of the sacramental priest owed much to Old Testament notions of priesthood. The position of bishop was influenced by the persons and roles of male secular rulers. Late in the second century the term “Hierus” which is only used in the New Testament for the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the whole people of God came to be applied to the bishop. As a result of this, and of the cultural background of the day, it is not surprising that the sacramental priesthood developed as a male order. For centuries women had to be content to exercise their ministry as nuns, mystics, visionaries and evangelists.

But as has often been remarked, there is nothing on the New Testament to suggest that things cannot be done for the first time. Christianity is an incarnate religion, and when the social circumstances became appropriate there is no *Biblical* reason why women cannot exercise a sacramental priestly ministry, just as from the earliest times women by baptism had entered into the priesthood of all believers.

Ordaining women to the priesthood is but another important stage in the development of the Christian ministry, helping to continue and perfect its traditions of service, in all its many forms. It is a relatively new development, but it is a development like others in the history of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit speaking to us in a new age.

The role of the priest as the representative of Christ

Does this mean that the priest has to be male?

Some would argue that the Lord is present in the minister of the Eucharist, and this minister must be male as by that mode we are reminded of the incarnation itself and Christ was incarnate as a male human being. Yet when we say that the priest “represents” Christ who is himself our one High Priest, we mean that the priest speaks and acts in Christ’s name – as well as addressing God in our name. There is nothing here that requires the priest to be male. There is no need for that person to resemble Christ in their gender or their physical appearance, for the Church is not trying to cast them in the part of Christ in a film or a play of the Last Supper. A “representative” is not the same as a “representation”. Women, who are redeemed just as men are, have an equal possibility of being called to represent their Redeemer.

What about the “ikon” theory?

This is a refinement of the concept of representation. It is the concept that the priest is a visual symbol or “ikon” of Christ and that this symbol becomes ineffectual – it does not work – if the priest is a woman.

Taken to logical conclusion this symbol would not really work unless the priest were a bearded man of Jewish appearance in his early thirties.

Can a woman be an ikon of Christ?

- Yes, because Jesus was incarnate as a human being and women are human too.
- Yes, because women by their baptism are part of the priesthood of all believers.
- Yes, because the Holy Spirit descends on us all, male and female alike, to carry out God’s purpose in the world.
- Yes, because the world can see in a priesthood of both men and women the full humanity of Christ in the wholeness of the ordained priesthood rather than highlighting his maleness.
- Yes, because it is the resurrected and ascended Christ and not just a male incarnate being who redeems us all, who comes to us in the Eucharist.

- Yes, because when the traditionalists insist that a man must represent Christ, they are applying such a representation as though the resurrection had not occurred.
- Yes, because to suggest that the eternal “Son” is biologically male is theologically inaccurate. It is counter to a full understanding of the eternal existence of the second person of the Trinity.

What is our calling?

The priest is called to help all of us, women and men, to carry out *our* calling and to remind us of it: our calling to give to the world the good news that, through Jesus Christ, God’s love can be shed abroad in the hearts and lives of every one of us – male and female, old and young. A fully representative priesthood must include women and men if it is to be a holistic reminder to all people.

The priesthood serves and enables the body of Christ. It also points to Christ and through Christ to God. Within the being of God both the masculine and the feminine, the male and the female are contained and surpassed. Within humanity both men and women are made in God’s image.