

SERMON FOR LENT 4 | 03.04.2019

Exodus 2: 1-10; 2 Corinthians 1: 3-7; St Luke 8: 19-21

Over the last few weeks we have tackled some pretty big sermon topics. At the end of February we looked at child abuse; the following week we discussed the political situation and the need for a common vision. On St Patrick's Day we explored some key elements within Celtic Spirituality including green issues; and last Sunday we were concerned with violence in society.

In the last of this series before we enter Passiontide and the run up to Easter, aware that today is Mothering Sunday, I would like us to turn our attention to gender and compassion.

One of the few positive things to say about the 271 bus which never comes, is that there is always time to listen to other people's conversations! Outside Highbury and Islington station, a group of four young men were in the middle of a passionate discussion. Three of them were white, one may well have come from the Indian subcontinent.

The argument was about segregated schooling. The first speaker said he was pleased he had been educated in an all boys school because the presence of girls in the classroom would have been a massive distraction. The Pakistani boy on the other hand started to make fun of him: *is that all you think about?* he said.

Sadly their bus came all too soon and I don't know how the discussion developed but the public debate about male and female identity, gender neutral issues, changing rooms and which gender ends up caring more for children and for the disadvantaged seems unrelenting. Which begs the question, is there a Christian insight that we ought to share?

Especially on Mothering Sunday / Mother's Day.

Because today is traditionally a celebration of all the wonderful things that Mums have done for millennia. It takes us to the heart of many families where mothers have the key role in the care and protection of the young as well as 95% of the household chores. A TV item on poverty yesterday highlighted the plight of a single mum with two teenage boys, trying to hold down a part-time job and a student course as well as bring up her sons on benefits.

The story of Moses fits that pattern; in the face of persecution his mother Miriam does all she can. There isn't a man in sight!

And yet the plethora of celebrations over the last few years celebrating the 100 years since women were allowed to vote, take up educational opportunities and practice as doctors, judges and company CEOs is testament to the length of time it has taken to make it possible for the doors to open sufficiently for women to take part in all the activities that were formerly only open to men. The recent international success of the women's cricket, rugby and football teams has been rightly applauded – although the match where Arsenal beat Liverpool in the Women's Super League was played in front of less than 600 people. And saddest of all, the third best UK national snooker champion was barred from playing in her local club somewhere up north. *This is no place for women*, the club secretary said...

So what was he suggesting? That she sit at home and look after the kids instead? Because that is more natural? Maria has an old tee-shirt at home which celebrated the centenary of women graduates at Durham: the slogan is, 'Not just a pretty face'.

Of course, here in Islington, we hope things are different: new men wouldn't think of treating their partners like that – and probably wouldn't get away with it if they tried!

And yet for Christians the prevailing stereotypes prevail strongly. The history of Israel, the nature of marriage through to Mother and Toddler groups all speak of a fixed order in which one particularly biological view dominates all else. How many prayers are addressed to our 'Father God', the patient but slightly remote figure who acts as the rock, the anchor for everything else? Is that really how we feel about him?

This ambivalence is hardly new. Way back in the 12th century, St Anselm (by no means a 21st century 'new man'!) came to realize the limitations of language when it came to talking about God. God is neither male nor female and yet we need a pronoun of some sort. What then happens of course is that the pronoun, the language, artificially builds up the differences of male and female and so Anselm was forced to use poetry to try, a thousand years ago, to try to iron out the difficulty.

**He wrote: *Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.***

But what if we acknowledge that the motherly qualities of gentleness and goodness are often just as present in men as in women: that what St Anselm was trying to do was to give us a picture of Jesus which didn't define him by his genes but by the generic qualities that we know are the gifts given by God to all human beings. Not that Jesus was gender neutral or an hermaphrodite but that it was his closeness to God that rendered him all loving and all gentle like ... and for example ... a mother is. Or a father, or a brother, a sister or the closest of friends. As the Gospel for today says, *Who is my mother and my family? They are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*

There is no doubt that this matter runs like a ginormous fault line through the Christian Church. Traditionalists both catholic and evangelical will shrug their shoulders in despair at any attempt to change what they take as a given: the Fatherhood of God, the maleness of Jesus and from that the retention of an all male priesthood. They would also want to say strongly that this isn't about one being better than the other but that in the same way that the human function of bearing a child can only be done by a woman, so the gift of creative energy and life, the image of the Creator God, only works when that can be received – as is the case of Mary who became the Mother of God's only Son.

Which is why the picture on the front of the pew sheet today is so controversial. I am sorry it isn't better quality but it caused a huge outcry when it was first published nearly thirty years ago now by those who wanted to promote the informed use of contraception: *wouldn't you be more careful if it was you who had to carry the baby?*

But society has moved on since then. With modern science it is now possible for almost any couple to become parents, male and female, male and male, female and female. Simon Wolfson, CEO of Next was speaking on Question Time on Thursday about his young daughter asking about why her friend, who had come for a sleepover, had two mummies. Apparently she didn't bat an eyelid when she was told about her friend's family structure.

Have we gone mad as a society? Is this deeply unnatural, running against all the intentions that God had for us?

Or can we embrace what modern understandings about human formation are clearly teaching us: that our sexuality is not binary – and never was. Each of us is a complex, unique and God-given mass of cells that, with large helpings of socialization, result in all kinds of self-understandings. To rely solely on one prescientific model just throws up more problems than it solves.

But problems there are, of course. We are into a really challenging era of learning how to appropriately relate to other people who stand on different parts of the spectrum – coping with language, dress and every kind of social engagement.

And for many that is immensely hard. The parents in Birmingham and Salford and Bradford who are protesting at primary school gates about the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in lessons devoted to relationships is a fraught one. I am no educationalist and I can't pretend to have an easy answer to that situation.

But what we can do, and I think must do, is to take St Anselm seriously when he uses poetry to overcome the historical and patriarchal legacy which has pushed love and compassion and care into the arms of one gender so much more than the other.

While at the same time we work for a society where men do not abandon their children to their female partners or assume that the work of nurturing children is really the preserve of women.

Mother's Day, Mothering Sunday: the day when we give thanks for our natural mothers and for those who love and care like mothers – as Jesus did, and does.