

SERMON FOR TRINITY 16 in CREATION SEASON | 27.09.2020

Genesis 2: 15-25; Galatians 3: 15-25; St Matthew 28: 1-10



There used to be a book called 'The Gospel according to Charlie Brown', the Peanuts character, but this cartoon came from my desk jotter pad that makes me smile each morning. Charlie Brown smacks a baseball at Lucy, gloved up some distance away. The ball lands directly behind her - and she hasn't moved a muscle. *What in the world is the matter with you?* he shouts. And the reply: *I'm a new feminist!* Which could be said to be shorthand for *Just because you are a male doesn't mean I have to play your games...*

In our second Sunday in Creation season, we are following up last week's topic when we looked at the current state of our planet and the effects of global warming. We asked, given that many of the worse symptoms of pollution was so very far away, whether it really had anything to do with us? To hand we had one of Jesus parables, the story of Dives and Lazarus.

This week I want to try to explore, albeit briefly, the words, *male and female he made them...* and the consequences of that. We can hardly say that these issues are too far away!

The debate about how much our gender affects our personality, our skills and our outlook on life will never run out of steam. I am no biologist but there is no lack of science available which explores if not explains the physical and emotional differences between men and women. But for today we have to leave biology to one side.

What may be more profitable is to look at the way in which men have dominated all facets of society in an almost entirely unchallenged way – certainly up the 1960s - using biblical sources (amongst others) to justify what they were doing. Headship - in family life, in the workplace, in professions as well as in the Church, was simply part of the natural order of things. Physical strength and the Bible were a pretty difficult combination to overcome.



Which is why I have put this graphic on the front of the Weekly news sheet today. The reference is from St Paul's 1st letter to Timothy chapter 2: *A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit women to teach and to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And then comes the rub: For Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became the sinner. But women will be saved by child-bearing - if they will continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety...*

And if you stumble across some of the more extreme evangelical websites commenting on this passage, especially if they are from the States, they will face you out: *it is there for all to see. No wriggle room: women are not to preach or to hold any authority over men. Period.*

With relish they send us back to today's 1st reading from Genesis: Adam was created first, and then Eve was created to be 'his helper...' Even then she messed up by eating the forbidden apple first.

And one is forced to ask: which came first – patriarchal misogyny or just plain male complacency? Because the whole tone of the Genesis story speaks to me (and many others) of something rather different from this wholly hierarchical set-up. When Adam complains of being lonely, God first gives him the job of naming the animals. Wouldn't that do? No; he is still lonely. And so what God provides is not another inferior but someone who could be his partner: *This at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.* Adam has an equal, a true companion with whom he could relate in the fullest sense. They would learn to explore the world together, stand by each other when things go wrong and discover by trial and error what worked and what didn't. It is interesting to see that God expels both of them from Eden when they broke the rules. He didn't kick Eve out on her own because she was thought to be more guilty. They were equally punished: him to physical manual labour, and she to pain in childbirth.

So is St Paul wrong in saying women should stay silent and be dependent on her partner? Or are we misusing the plain sense of these words to bolster outdated social traditions well past their sell by date? Because there is another reading of the original Greek which makes these prohibitions both temporary and particular. Paul Koshlyink, in an extended article on this passage, says that what Paul was angry about was the damage being done by a group of women who were very effectively undermining the local Church in Ephesus with secret 'Gnostic' teaching about what foods could be eaten and whether people should marry – ideas that were not in the Gospel. It just so happened that the Ephesians were being influenced by a cult which taught that women were 'special mediators of divine truth' and were therefore better able to teach about spiritual matters than men.

So what Paul was trying to do was to stop what was being taught, not by whom the teaching was given. The injunction is against a mix of bad theology and imported Greek myths. In this particular example the false teachers just happened to be women.

Which is why, once the problem had been sorted out, St Paul goes on to encourage women like Priscilla, Junia, Phoebe and others to lead the Church in Ephesus as was in the case in many of the churches that he oversaw. The crisis that Paul was facing was not the result of a load of uppity women but about what happens when poorly educated men or women veer away from the Gospel because they simply didn't know any better.

But you need to do a bit of digging to get the real truth behind the words in I Timothy. And you have to set this passage alongside other passages to get a bigger picture still. Take our 2nd reading for example. I have had to make the passage a bit easier to follow but the essence is that before grace was available, we were obliged to follow the formal Law as the only way to make sure that we didn't kill each other – literally and metaphorically. And rules are unyielding and inflexible – and based on hierarchies. You do what I tell you because I am bigger than you – and I know best.

And then God sends the Holy Spirit and turns everything upside down. It is no longer strength that matters: what matters is truth, love, decency and the care of the weak and the poor. As in last week's Gospel, the poor man gets to heaven and the rich man languishes in Hell. As Mary sang at the Annunciation, *He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and sent the rich empty away.* Now that the old hierarchies have gone and the Law has been toppled from its place as 'the natural way of doing things' then, the 2nd reading goes on to say: *from now on there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.* These false distinctions - false that is, in the Kingdom of God where they have no relevance. *For all of us are one in Christ Jesus.*

And just to make the point, there are times, even in a book as culturally saturated with male dominance and tradition as the Bible, when the tables are turned altogether.

For today's Gospel story of the Resurrection, of life conquering death, of hope overcoming what seemed perilously like the complete end of the Jesus experiment, starts with the fact that it is a woman to whom Jesus first appears – and it is women who go to tell the frightened apostles that he alive and well after the trauma of Good Friday.

Now how ridiculous would it be to use the fact that it was women who first spread the news of the Resurrection as the reason for saying that only women could therefore be priests and bishops?

Which is why, when the Diocese is ordaining a whole new crop of men and women as deacons in St Paul's Cathedral today, we need to reflect far more carefully on the real sense of Genesis and what God did in the face of Adam's loneliness. He gave him a full and equal partner with whom to live and learn. Equal - yet different; truly complimentary. Their ability to make love and create children would only be possible when both were involved: neither one nor the other able to create and become parents on their own.

Why did it take the better part of two thousand years for us to reach this apparently obvious conclusion? Because the lust for power, for control, is not easily given up by those in charge. The autocratic President of Belarus is not arresting the opposition in Minsk for fun: he fixes elections because it offers a fig leaf to his illegitimate power-hungry regime. Elsewhere men have had to let go of their hierarchies – but in so doing have been able to discover what true partnership is really about. And not before time.

When the Anglican Communion took the momentous decision to ordain and consecrate women, it was in order to release their gifts of grace in a kingdom where distinctions of class, race and gender have no place. As I have tried to show, that is equally true in Genesis as it is in the Resurrection Garden at Easter – and in 1st century Ephesus where, had St Paul been a little more savvy, he could have made his position so much clearer! Not all women, just some women were leading his Church astray. This is what he was trying to sort out.

We all write things we regret: I certainly do. We could, with hindsight often be clearer. But what we can't do is to pretend that a reading of Scripture which protects old stereotypical ideas of how men should control women should, now that the old Law has been abandoned, now have any place in the kingdom of God or in his Church. That is the Good News in this season of Creation.