

## **The Case for Women Bishops**

**(A paper originally commissioned for use in parish magazines in the Church in Wales)**

Most people I speak to, both clergy and laity, would like to see women bishops in the Church in Wales but often find it difficult to refute the arguments put forward for barring women from the episcopacy because no one has actually spelled them out. Here, in the brief amount of space, allowed are the 5 main areas of contention:

1. Theological, in other words, those which pertain directly to God and specifically to the person of Jesus Christ in relation to the priesthood. Those who oppose women's ministry, and here it is worth noting that the objections to women as bishops are in fact a continuation, or reinforcement, of objections to their ministry as priests, often do so on the basis of 'apostolic tradition'. They argue that Jesus was a man and that he instituted a male apostolic succession in the moment he laid hands on the apostle Peter and declared that the Church would be built on him. Thereafter, they argue, ordination was only valid through the male apostolic line. This is where the idea of an exclusive 'maleness' in regard to the priesthood and episcopacy takes root. It is theologically flawed because Jesus did not come simply as a male. He embraced our humanity and with it the whole human condition, both male and female. It is in this sense that he is the 'second Adam', Adam, who symbolises the human race, being a 'type' or 'prefiguring' of the one to come. Both Adam and Eve are made 'in the image and likeness of God' and together represent the human race. To argue that only men can be bishops is to imply that only men are made in his image, with women being no more than a kind of 'follow on' or derivative and that they are thereby deficient in their humanity. This suggests that women are of secondary importance in God's plan of salvation. The maleness of Christ, and the 'secondary' nature of women as human beings, leads into the subject of headship and authority. Christ's own teaching on authority was spelled out in service and sacrifice, rather than in rules of succession favouring men. The theological issues are not limited to ideas of the person of Christ, or even of a Trinitarian God. They reappear in different guises in the context of some of the other arguments which are put forward to prevent women from becoming bishops and, until recently, priests.
2. Scripture. Where scripture is used to argue against women becoming bishops (or priests), the reasons put forward almost always derive from a particular mind set concerning how scripture is to be read and interpreted, if it is deemed permissible to try to interpret it at all. For conservative evangelicals, every word of scripture is the literal truth, the indisputable word of God. There are one or two selective texts which

are often deployed to reinforce this position, two of the most significant pertaining, apparently, to the apostle Paul. They are often linked in to a literalist understanding of Gen. 3:16. This idea is picked up and honed even further by Paul in his first letter to Timothy, especially 2:12 and, in regard to authority and leadership in 1 Cor. 11:3 and 14:34 where he writes that women should be silent in church and forbids them to teach. It is tempting, whatever position a person holds on women's ministry, to play 'pick and mix' with scripture and ignore the way it was written and its context and purpose for its own times, thereby failing to grasp its deeper meaning for us today. All the passages I have cited were written in a particular historical context.<sup>i</sup> Timothy, if it was written by Paul, and some scholars now doubt this, as well as his letter to the Corinthians, were written in a particular social context. The Church, if it was to survive, could not afford to be ahead of its own times. Women in those days were little more than the property of their husbands or fathers, so to allow them to teach, or walk about unveiled would have drawn undue attention to the Christian community and possibly put lives at risk. None of this carries any weight when applied to the place of women in the Church and world of today. Furthermore, the Anglican tradition itself is modelled on the bringing together of scripture, tradition and reason. It is distinctive in its emphasis on the use of reason when interpreting scripture and tradition itself for our times. Those who remain Anglican while at the same time fighting shy of its true character usually come from a conservative evangelical position (the inerrancy of scripture) or an arcane Anglo Catholic traditionalism whereby women's sacramental ministry is deemed invalid and, by virtue of their gender alone, 'tainted'. This leads into the third area of resistance to women's priestly and episcopal ministry.

3. It is 'un-natural' for a woman to be a bishop This is not really an argument, since it falls more into the category of 'gut reaction', as is the case with issues pertaining to homosexuality. Gut reactions need to be examined closely. If they are to be dignified as an argument, they probably fall into two areas of contention. The first relates back to 'taint' and the idea that a woman's monthly cycle makes her 'impure' and thereby unfit to handle the chalice or the Eucharistic host. This kind of thinking has been around since the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Augustine wrestled with it until he concluded that the validity of a sacrament is in no way impeded by the purity, or lack of it, of the one presiding. The second gut reaction amounts to what has been described as 'the visceral dread of female authority'.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, fear and feeling threatened by women who have particular gifts, or who are simply excellent priests. For the rest, see above. Gut reaction is often projected as 'conscience', when it ought to be owned for what it is, an unquestioned intellectual and cultural conditioning which amounts to prejudice.
4. The Church is at risk of ceding to secularism. The real issue here is fear of change and what some have perceived as innovation. It is largely the result of shallow

theology whereby the status quo is maintained because it is vaguely perceived as the 'way God wants things to be'. It ignores the two most important areas of Trinitarian thinking, the 'economic' or moving and working life of the Holy Spirit and the 'ontological', the ongoing deep and abiding presence of that Spirit in the midst of the Church's life. These 2 doctrines teach us that the 'working' of God goes on in the life of the world and that the world itself has wisdom, knowledge and experience which can play a part in that work. The deep 'ontological' presence requires that the Church's life and relationships mirror that of the Trinity in the unconditional love it has for God and in the honouring of the way other Christians love.

5. Lastly, Unity. I have long been a proponent of honouring and seeking to understand those who reject my ministry as a woman. But I have lately come to the conclusion that while this is all very well for the individual, it cannot be expected *de facto* of the Church as a whole. Resolving conflict comes with righting injustice and confronting prejudice and peace and reconciliation can only take effect once this has happened. Otherwise, we are living a lie. As things stand, both in England and in Wales, the Church's credibility, and that of the Gospel itself, are being severely undermined. Furthermore, with the likelihood of the government withdrawing the Church of England's immunity from laws pertaining to gender discrimination in the work place, we are all starting to look ridiculous. The Church in Wales, as a separate Anglican Province, has the chance to give the lead and redress this situation by voting for an unconditional acceptance of women's ministry as bishops. Only then can the work of reconciliation begin and real unity be achieved.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis is thought to be one of the latest books in the bible, written shortly after the Babylonian exile. Much of the Old Testament was written as a warning and safeguard against the consequences of idolatry.

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Coakley 'Has the Church of England finally lost its reason? Women bishops and the collapse of Anglican theology'