

Lent Address on Feminism, St Mary's Warwick 12/3/17

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Holy Spirit, take my words and speak to each of us according to our need. Amen

I'm going to start with a question. 'Are women human?'

Some of you may have heard this question before, as it forms the title of an essay by novelist Dorothy L. Sayers', based on a talk she gave to a women's society in 1938. Sayers' argument in this essay is that people should not be treated simply as a group because of their sex. We should not say that 'all men should do X' or 'all women should do Y', for instance 'all women should stay at home with their children' or 'all women should go to university and have a career'. Men and women should not be seen just as categories. Rather, they should be seen as individual human beings.

'Are women human?' seems an odd question today and that's a measure of the success of feminism. Looking for Dorothy L Sayers' essay of this title, I put out a request on Facebook for people who might have it in their library. An undergraduate student who is a friend of mine sent me an alarmed message: 'Are women human? Is that a serious question?' he asked. Well no, in 2017, it's not, and I reassured him. The younger generation particularly take gender equality for granted. They assume that there's nothing innate about men or women that make them incapable of doing certain jobs or holding political office. It's not a serious question, for them at least. But is it true to say the question 'Are women human?' has really gone away? in the sense that Sayers meant it? Is it true in the church or in the wider world?

Women and men are different categories of people, you might argue, in the same way that black people and white, working class and middle class, old and young, heterosexual and gay, are categories of people. But we know that all such categories, whatever basis in economics or biology they might have, are constructs, used by many in society to deprive the less powerful group of their rightful place. Racism, ageism, sexism, classism, homophobia are ways those categories get mobilised to exclude some, and to give others unmerited power and reward.

This 'category thinking' is what Sayers was bothered by, because it denies the full humanity of women. And here I quote a theologian some of you may recognise, the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether – or as Linda Woodhead recently wrote, 'I do not call feminist theologians feminist theologians any more – I just call them theologians'. Ruether said this, in her 1983 book *Sexism and God Talk*, 'The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive.'

Ruether is of the view that theology should be shaped or judged in the light of women's experience, and that if something about our faith and practice denies women's full humanity, denies the equal worth of men and women, it should be rejected. It's a controversial point, and some have argued that human experience should never be

made the supreme judge – instead, scripture, church tradition and reason should be the supreme authority, and we must bring our human experiences into line with those. But of course we can never escape the role of human experience in human reasoning as we interpret the Bible or church history. Experience is integral to how we reason. Experience is integral to the three pillars of Anglican understanding: scripture, tradition and reason, not to mention being seen as a fourth source of authority by some, including John Wesley. So I think Ruether's point can be justified: women's experience has value.

I was asked to speak about how I think feminism has changed, is changing or should be changing Christianity. Here I will turn to the story of Mary and Martha, that we read, the story of Jesus visiting Lazarus's two unmarried sisters. [I'll read it again]

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing.[a] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

This story has a lot to say about the 'Are women human?' question, the 'should we see women simply as a category of people who should behave similarly, or as individuals?' question. Here, Jesus behaves in a way that transgressed Jewish gender roles. He talks with women, as the Rabbis of his time thought improper, and becomes friends with them. But when Jesus enters Mary and Martha's house, Martha takes on the conventional feminine role of waiting on others. Mary, in contrast, wants to learn from Jesus – the phrase 'to sit at his feet' meant to be a Rabbi's disciple and was never used of women – and she is praised for doing this, while Martha is rebuked. She is rebuked for behaving in the conventional feminine role.

Isn't that interesting? It may not strike us so forcefully today, but at the time this was revolutionary. 'By allowing Mary and Martha to be his disciplines, Jesus was signalling that Christianity would be a religion of male and female equality, where women, and what's more, single women, should be encouraged to learn in the same way men learned' (Aune 2002: 105).

But the church has not always managed to see this passage in this way. Dorthy L. Sayers remarks:

'I think I have never heard a sermon preached on the story of Martha and Mary that did not attempt somehow, somewhere, to explain away its text. Mary's, of course, was the better part – the Lord said so, and we must not precisely contradict Him. But we will be careful not to despise Martha. No doubt, he approved of her too. We could not get on without her, and indeed... we greatly prefer her, for Martha was doing a really feminine job, whereas Mary was just

behaving like any other disciple.’ (Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2005.)

But the power of this story for women was the way in which Jesus overturned conventions about what women should be doing – and single women at that – the way he treated them not as a stereotype who would bring upon him rumour of sexual impropriety or who would be better off in the kitchen, but as individual learners and followers.

The trajectory of early Christianity, therefore, was to liberate women from the gender stereotypes, the ‘category thinking’, that shaped their lives. But does that still happen today? Well, often it does, but not always, especially when we look at the church as an institution. The church as institution does not always liberate women or enable their full humanity, and that is what prompted feminists to intervene.

I speak as an academic who has studied religion, gender and feminism, and as someone who has personally been involved in Christian feminism. I was for nearly 10 years part of the now-defunct evangelical feminist group Men, Women & God, and in 2012 I co-founded a network called the Christian Feminist Network which is active online but not much offline. I also speak as the next generation, someone who has benefitted from the work done by those who went before me.

By virtue of my previous involvement in the group Men, Women & God, I’m fortunate to now house one of its founder members’ Christian feminist book collections. This gives a good overview of the sorts of issues that have preoccupied Christian feminists over the last few decades.

I recently moved house, and unpacking my bookshelves, I reflected on the titles of the many books I have on Christian feminism. For example, *A Dangerous Delight: Women and Power in the Church* (Furlong 1991), *The Case for women’s Ministry* (Ruth Edwards 1989), *Women: Invisible in Church and Theology* (Fiorenza, 1985), *Through the Devil’s Gateway: Women, Religion and Taboo* (Joseph, 1990).

A lot of these books were trying to move women away from being stereotyped, as purely sexual beings, or as perfect wives and mothers, and moving the church towards accepting them as having a public ministry.

The Christian feminist movement sadly tends to be forgotten when histories of feminism are written, as historian Jenny Daggars, who wrote a book about it called *The British Christian Women’s Movement*, remarked. But it was a very important movement especially in the 1970s and 80s. Its most high profile group was the Movement for the Ordination of Women which ran from 1979 to 1994 – and if you want to see their archives, they’re now at the LSE in London. But there were many other groups including Catholic Women’s Network, and the group I know most about, the evangelical group Men, Women and God.

Men, Women & God began in 1985 with a conference at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, an organisation linked to evangelical elder statesman Revd

John Stott. The conference attracted 500 people and was co-sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance. Keynote speaker Elaine Storkey, who had just published a book called *What's Right with Feminism?*, gave a lecture 'The feminist case against the church'. From that 1985 conference the Men, Women and God (MWG) Trust formed; its mission was, I quote:

'[to help women and men talk and work together towards the vision of 'in Christ there is neither male nor female, but all are one'; and to demonstrate to the world, in particular the feminist movement, that the gospel is good news after all. We believe that where women experience Christ's liberation to be themselves, men will too.' they wrote (Anon. 1987a)

They called themselves 'biblical feminists', because they saw gender equality as something the Bible taught, and they wanted to emphasise that. They saw the male-only leadership theology adopted by some conservative evangelicals as an incorrect, unbiblical, interpretation.

MWG ran conferences, local discussion groups, spoke at evangelical events (Anon. 1987a; Anon. 1987b) and produced a book edited by Kathy Keay (1987), who was a hugely important voice in that movement, a voice that has almost been forgotten (she died of cancer in 1994 when she was just 40, and in 2010 the writer Marion Osgood wrote her biography, with the title 'Whatever happened to Kathy Keay?' She lived just long enough to see the first women ordained priests.

This Christian feminist work, which continued through groups such as WATCH, whose work was crucial in Synod voting for women to be allowed to become Bishops in 2014, has had considerable success.

The Church of England has seen major advances for women in leadership. Women are now (2015) 27% of stipendiary clergy – in other words, paid clergy – and among those now being ordained, they're 41%. We now have 10 female bishops. Compared to Parliament, where women are now 30% of MPs, the change in the church since 1994 when the first women were ordained, has been more swift, although many would say that 27% of stipendiary clergy is not as good as it could be.

But progress has been uneven – there are Anglican churches who do not support women's ordination or would not appoint a female vicar, as well as movements such as Forward in Faith that cater for this group.

This is in the news at the moment in relation to the new Bishop of Sheffield. Given that he believes women – as a category - should not be ordained, should he have oversight of female priests who he believes, as a category, should not exist? Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church Oxford, thinks not. Others, including Archbishop of York Dr John Sentamu, disagree. Is this an illustration of the sort of thinking that sees women as a category, as a category before they are human beings or individuals? Or is it simply a form of the good disagreement that the Church of England prides itself on?

Female clergy are only in equal numbers in unpaid, non-stipendiary roles. Among the under 32s training for priesthood, only 1 in 4 is a woman. Writing in the Church Times 6 months ago in an article entitled 'Wanted: young women priests', curate Elizabeth Clutterbuck pointed out that young women need active encouragement, opportunities and role models, as 'There is no point in trying to urge women to be ordained if they cannot see a place for themselves within the Church'. She notes that there is a lack of young women going forward for ordination.

If we look wider still in the church – internationally, in the wider Anglican communion, half the 38 national member churches do not allow female bishops and c. 20% do not allow female priests. The Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women and the picture in the free churches varies widely.

But, it's not just about ordination. It's also about whether men and women who members of local churches and members of the communities those churches serve, have their full humanity recognised. Mainstream society is not fully gender equal, and the fact that men still on average get paid more than women who are doing the same job is evidence of that.

But many in wider society see religion as an obstacle to gender equality. They perceive a gap between religious organisations and mainstream society, and the church has a bad press with secular feminists. That bothers me, and I have observed and researched the erosion of women from churches, whether they are leaving because they're fed up, or whether their lives do not or cannot fit the traditional patterns for womanhood that the church has advocated for them – women in full-time paid work are, for instance, much less likely to go to church than women who are stay-at-home mums.

But there remains a gap between the idea of women's full humanity that Dorothy L Sayers – and arguably, the New Testament – advocates, and what's happening at grassroots level.

It is incumbent on those of us who remain committed to the church as well as to the full humanity of women to work to remove that gap between ideal and reality. What does this mean? What does it involve? It will involve different things for different people, as befits our skills and opportunities. In countries where girls don't receive as much education as boys, what is the church doing to redress that balance? How can we make women's theological study a priority, instead of, for instance, expecting the women to run the Sunday school and set up the coffee cups while the men listen to the sermon? Does the church give equal remuneration to its female and male paid staff? Do we donate nappies and sanitary products to food banks, who have a particular ministry to women raising children in poverty? Do church teachings and support systems address the needs of the unseen victims of domestic abuse within their congregations and communities? I mention this one because I am starting a research project with the domestic violence charity Restored on how churches deal with domestic abuse, and the answer in many cases is 'they don't'.

If our answer to 'Are women human?' is, 'of course', we must also look to how our actions witness to that truth, the truth of the full humanity of women. We must look to how we can encourage women to choose, like Mary in the New Testament passage, the one thing needful, prioritising discipleship over feminine domesticity, and look to how we can change our structures to enable this to happen.