

Teaching Course on Ministry and Bishops

Introduction

The teaching material is aimed at providing an explanation of why the historic faith of the Church teaches that priesthood and episcopacy are male ministries. It is hoped that those who explore this material, whatever their view on this question, will grow in understanding as to what it is that those who keep to the historic faith believe. Many misconceptions abound. We also hope that the content will be accessible to those who are coming new to the question of the identity of men and women in ministry. Deliberately we start at the beginning by asking some basic questions about the nature of vocation and ministry and its relationship to God and the world. We then move on to look more specifically at ordained ministry and the sacred symbols that it bears. The second session opens up the subject of the female vocation and ministry drawing on the strong Biblical tradition. Having established the historic nature of male and female within ministry the third and fourth sessions give explanation of episcopacy. The sessions work rather like a microscope, focusing more precisely as the course continues.

The material is primarily intended for ordinary C of E folk. The media, who have little time for giving the theological background, forms the perception that much of the debate is merely about political manoeuvring. The teaching material presents a traditional thesis – that said we hope that it is encouraging of women's ministry and in a modest way may contribute to the on-going process of discernment.

Ideally the sessions would be given within a group as discussion is anticipated. The group convenor may wish to distribute the whole course material or just the associated handouts. It will be useful to have Bibles to hand. Each session starts with an opening prayer for the group. The supplementary material is provided as a support for discussion.

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Session One Teaching Material

What is vocation, ministry, priesthood?

Opening Prayer

O God, you have told us to pray for more labourers in your harvest field. We ask that we may hear your call to the work of ministry. Enable us by your grace to be your living witnesses. Make us sensitive to your guidance, willing to learn and eager to serve. We ask this in the name of Him who came Not to be ministered to but to minister, Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

Have you found it yet?

Each of us has been created as an act of God's love. It is His life-giving love that has willed us into existence and sustains us. The life that God gives is always creative and purposeful. In many ways our earthly pilgrimage is about sharing with others what we have received from Him. God calls us to Himself, adopts us as His sons and daughters at our baptism and grants us a place and identity within both His creation and His family the Church. This gift is our vocation and it will somehow always be about us showing to the world some aspect of His nature. The relationship we have with God leads us to actions, words and witness and this is our vocation finding a ministry. The very name Christian means to be Christ-like. And we are so for the sake of others.

We can be hopeful and expectant that we have a vocation and a ministry to offer. Too often we can think of ministry in terms of 'what am I good at,' or 'what needs doing.' This isn't the right place to start. Our vocation is about the YOU God has created and loves. The starting place is our relationship both with God and with His body, the Church. Where is that relationship possibly leading you to feel more purposeful? Where in your life can God reveal His nature and act through you? These are humbling thoughts but hopefully enlivening ones too.

The Scriptures reveal to us a whole series of images and symbols of God which our vocations and ministries are to bear to the world. The life of the Church is our glorious Amen, our hymn of 'yes' to the chosen symbols of God.

Discussion

Thinking about vocation and the Church. In the Book of Revelation it speaks of the angels of the churches. This angel was the particular ethos or message that characterised an individual local church. When you think about your own church what would you describe as its angel – what is the message of God it gives and what is the message it could give? As we start to think through the answers we are deepening our understanding of the vocation and ministry of our church and our own part in that work of God.

The ordained ministry: Bishops, Priests and Deacons

Within the household of faith there are a huge number of ministries that work to reveal God. We now turn to look at priesthood. We'll consider what actually is priesthood and what are the symbols that God has given by which He will be revealed through His priesthood.

Session One Teaching Material continued...

What is vocation, ministry, priesthood?

“Mind the Gap”

Priesthood is the rather like a communication network. Priesthood is the means of mediation between God, who is all holy, and mankind, who falls a long way short of being holy. It is Jesus Christ, the high priest, who fills the gap between God and us. We are invited into and become part of the priestly work of Christ by our baptism. When we are baptised we join the Royal Priesthood of all believers. This is our Amen, our yes to accepting the priesthood of Christ and our willingness to allow Him to draw us to the Father. When we pray and feel that wonderful closeness of God, what we are experiencing is made possible by the operation of priesthood. So priesthood is not made-made, not a useful way of organising the institution of the Church. Priesthood is a gift from God who has granted it certain divine symbols through which we can know God and be known. It's an awesome thought.

So priesthood is God's, we are incorporated into its work by our baptism – so where does the ordained ministry fit-in? Bishops, priests and deacons are not given to the Church to do 'it' instead of us but rather are the ones who are the living signs of the symbols. In their lives they safely bring those divine symbols down to earth. They enact the symbols before us and in so doing help us deepen the working of Christ's priesthood within us.

God, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, comes to meet us and then guides and draws us to Himself. The key for us is to be receptive to receive the symbols of priesthood which He provides. Throughout the Scriptures we read of how God has revealed Himself. We need to trust those images of revelation in order that we can safely make it over the gap.

Why symbols?

Symbols are very good at holding a lot of meaning. Symbols aren't blunt definitions and therefore have a living quality to them. They can point us through them to a much greater meaning. Jesus taught in the symbolic fashion of parables. The simple, everyday stories that he told contain profound messages. God allows us to know Him and provides us with symbols so that we can deepen that knowing and experience. So never think in terms of 'mere symbols' – they are at the heart of God's gentle and knowing relationship with us.

Exercise

Those in advertising and the media know very well the power of symbols. Look at some magazine or newspaper advertisements and see what the image is saying about the product. Then image some detail in the picture being changed. For instance if the image depicts young people, imagine if the picture replaces them with those who are older, or if the gender of everyone in the picture was depicted the other way around, or humans replaced by animals. Sometimes the imagined change can be subtle, or humorous and sometimes it can be disturbing. This simple exercise shows us that if we alter symbols then inevitably the meaning that they once carried is altered.

The Symbols of Priesthood

Let's look at the symbols that God has chosen for the priesthood and explore the picture that taken together they build.

The ordained ministry is the living witness in the here and now of how God has historically revealed Himself. God the Father came to redeem us, to restore us to Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father.' The supreme symbol and image of God is Jesus. We can describe this as Jesus being the icon of the Father. Icon is a useful word as it reminds us that symbols can carry divine messages that are open to us to read. All of God's chosen images of priesthood that we find in the Scriptures are male. How ever people might argue about this or seek to explain it, male identity still remains the given of the Scriptures. As we said in the introduction, vocation and ministry is something that God works through men and women and in the next session we will look at the rich examples in Scripture that reveal the feminine vocation and ministry. The male priest and bishop bear the symbols by their very nature. A woman, by her very nature, has graces and symbols that she bears witness to. The economy of all of God's chosen symbols lived out in ministry compliment one another, allowing for each symbol rather than narrowing the focus. All build together the greater image of the household of faith.

Session One Teaching Material continued...

What is vocation, ministry, priesthood?

**Some of the Symbols of Priesthood...
...and when we speak of priesthood we
are also meaning bishops, in fact
especially bishops.**

The Symbol: The Father and the Son

God is spirit and is not male or female. However, He has chosen to reveal His being to us under the symbols of Father and Son. We are not to understand this as an image made up of the very best elements of human fatherhood; rather this is divine fatherhood and speaks of relationship within the Godhead. It is a relationship of absolute obedience, truth and self-sacrifice. The name Father is supremely revealed to us by Christ His Son. Jesus tells us to call God Abba and Our Father. The name Father is recorded 250 times in the New Testament. The Father sends the Son as the one to reveal Him, the Son sends the apostles to continue this witness of the Godhead. A human mother naturally bears the Son physically into the world, and in her son and the Son of God all humanity is represented. Jesus is the symbol of the Father and the New Adam, the sign that creation is renewed and redeemed. The male priest and bishop stand naturally and obviously within this series of overflowing revelation and help us to see and feel this great mystery of our faith.

The Symbol: Sacrifice

A vital way for us to understand our relationship with God is by sacrifice. The Father sends the Son in pure love and self-sacrifice for our redemption. The Old Testament tells a long story of sacrifice which has its fulfilment in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. God instituted the male priesthood of the Jewish people with its intricate laws of ritual and blood sacrifice as a sign of the keeping of the relationship – the relationship – with Him. Christ renews the priesthood in the twelve male apostles who bear the symbols of the new Covenant. To them alone is given the command to celebrate the new sacrifice of the Eucharist that continues the one perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The Symbol: The Bridegroom and the Bride

The Covenant between God and mankind is revealed in the Scriptures many times under the image of a faithful marriage. The symbol of the priest and bishop as bridegroom is particularly drawn from the New Testament. The New Jerusalem, the new home of the faithful is the Church and she is described in feminine language. The Church is the bride. God loves His bride and sends His Son to give Himself wholly to and for the bride. The feminine language used of the Church has in the great tradition spoken of the Church as the body that is receptive and responsive to the symbol of her bridegroom, Christ. The male priest and bishop bear this image of this marriage relationship to the Church.

Discussion

Reflecting back on our previous discussion of symbols and how they work, if we were to disregard or significantly change these symbols what would that do to our understanding and experience of priesthood? Would it not be a new and different priesthood?

The Twelve Apostles

The bishop and, by delegation, the priest continue the ministry and presence of the apostles. And the apostles were themselves the continuation of the revelation of the Son to the Father. The bishop and priest are the icon of Christ, who is the icon of the Father. To fulfil this ministry the gospels record that Christ chose twelve men. He chose them very deliberately after a night of prayer out of His faithful band of disciples, which included many women. Jesus describes the apostles as not only His choice but also as those that the Father had given Him. The apostles were not chosen because of qualification for 'the job' but because of who and what they were. They fulfilled the symbolic purposes of priesthood. Jesus said to them, 'You did not choose me, I chose you.' Their calling was not about granting them worldly importance or power, the teaching about the first being last and the last first and the Master washing their feet taught them that. Their vocation was to reflect the obedience of the Son to the Father and to be the bearers of the symbols of the new Covenant. They were commissioned to preach, heal, celebrate the Eucharist, to absolve, to baptise and to spread the teaching of the faith. Upon them the Church was built. This must have seemed daunting to say the least but Christ assured them, 'I am with you always.' Those words remind us that the Son is the one who is truly active in the ministry of a priest and bishop. Throughout the Christian centuries the Church has faithfully imitated Christ's example by ordaining men to carry on the apostolic succession.

Discussion

As we have seen the symbols are not a matter of acting but are carried in the essence and nature of those who bear them. It is not that the bishop or priest vaguely looks like the symbol but that their very nature speaks of the symbol and makes it easier for us to see how Christ is acting through the image. Through many millennia of faith, from ancient Aaron to Christ and through the apostles and to the modern day, the Church has understood that these symbols are to be enacted in the lives of some chosen men. It is the gift of spiritual paternity revealing God our Father.

If the Church were going to reinterpret the symbols and move beyond the example of Christ, what would be a sufficient authority to do this so that it can be done with confidence? It would not be enough to say, 'the majority thinks so in our particular time' (remember, truth might be the lone voice in the wilderness) – and it would be very uncertain to claim a unique authority from the Holy Spirit.

Session One Handout

What is ministry and priesthood?

Have you found it yet?

- Everyone is called to be a witness of God.
- Training might teach you to be better at witnessing but it's not primarily about training, acquiring skills and then doing things it's about YOU. The very You God has created and loves.

Discussion

Thinking about vocation and the Church. In the Book of Revelation it speaks of the angels of the churches. This angel was the particular ethos or message that characterised an individual local church. When you think about your own church what would you describe as its angel – what is the message of God it gives and what is the message it could give? As we start to think through the answers we are deepening our understanding of the vocation and ministry of our church and our own part in that work of God.

Exercise

Those in advertising and the media know very well the power of symbols. Look at some magazine or newspaper advertisements and see what the image is saying about the product. Then imagine some detail in the picture being changed. For instance if the image depicts young people, imagine if the picture replaces them with those who are older, or if the gender of everyone in the picture was depicted the other way around, or humans replaced by animals. Sometimes the imagined change can be subtle, or humorous and sometimes it can be disturbing. This simple exercise shows us that if we alter symbols then inevitably the meaning that they once carried is also altered.

Priesthood

- This is God acting on our behalf to fill the gap between Himself and us.
- What fills the gap is Christ the High Priest
- By our baptism into Christ we become part of His priestly activity. It's why all prayers finish with 'Through Christ our Lord' or something similar.
- To deepen our understanding and experience of priesthood God has revealed certain symbols (or picture or icons) that He represents through the ministerial priesthood
- Symbols can carry richer meanings than blunt explanations

The Symbols of Priesthood

- The Father and the Son.
- Sacrifice
- The Bride and Bridegroom

Discussion

Reflecting back on our previous discussion of symbols and how they work; if we were to disregard or significantly change the symbols what would that do to our understanding and experience of priesthood? Would it be a new priesthood bearing a different meaning?

The Twelve Apostles

- God sent His Son as the Image of the Father. Jesus said, 'Those who have seen me have seen the Father.' The Son calls twelve men to be Apostles. The Apostles are the living image of the Son, who in turn is the image of the Father. An interconnected chain of witnessing.
- Jesus actions are very deliberate in choosing twelve male Apostles from a band of disciples that included many women

Discussion

As we have seen the symbols are not a matter of play-acting. The meaning of the symbol is carried in the very essence and nature of those who bear them. It is not that the bishop or priest vaguely looks like the symbol but that their nature speaks of the symbol and makes it easier for us to see how Christ is acting through the image. Through many millennia of faith, from ancient Aaron to Christ and through the Apostles and to the modern day, the Church has understood that these symbols are to be enacted in the lives of some chosen men. It is the gift of spiritual paternity revealing God our Father. If the Church were going to reinterpret the symbols and move beyond the example of Christ, what would be a sufficient authority to do this so that it can be done with confidence? It would not be enough to say, 'the majority thinks so in our particular time' (remember, truth might be the lone voice in the wilderness) – and it would be very uncertain to claim a unique authority from the Holy Spirit.

Session Two Teaching Material

The Biblical Roots of the Ministry of Women

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray that all those who serve you in the ministry of your Church may fulfil their calling in dependence on your grace and in harmony with your will; that by the power of your Holy Spirit they may be signs of your presence and life. We ask this through Jesus Christ our great High Priest.

Recovering the female vocation and ministry

The Church has a well-established tradition for understanding the male vocation of ordination and the sacred symbols that it represents. But the Church is often less clear in its understanding of the female vocation. Some would even go as far as dismissing notions that God could have particular ministries especially for women and men. The Bible does not however teach of a blind inter-changeability between the sexes – God has enriched His creation with male and female. He allows for difference and radical compatibility. This is the very stuff of life and creation. In this session we will open up some ways of rediscovering the ministries of women that are revealed by scripture. Such ministries form a well-founded tradition, once alive in the Church, but now rather forgotten. To question the ordination of women is not to question the ministry of women – many of us who believe in an essential male priesthood and episcopacy expressly do so because we wish to affirm and encourage the female vocation with its own particular graces.

A small sample from the Bible of women's ministry

The Bible recounts and celebrates many great ministries fulfilled by women. Like the ministries of men, many of these women were chosen by God to shape the very course of sacred history. Here are just some of whom the Old Testament tells:

Rebecca – She influences the Hebrew tribes so that in blessing Isaac they chose someone of wisdom rather than mere popularity (Genesis 27)

Rachel – She is key to understanding the story of the Twelve Tribes and to why some are united and others separated (Genesis 29-31)

Tamar – Her life shows how the promises of God are fulfilled against all the odds. Hers is a story of social justice. (Genesis 38)

Miriam – Her name means 'prophetess' and reminds us of the prophetic voice of God spoken through women that appears throughout the Bible. She was a leader of the Hebrew people during their exile, an exile that became the great founding time for Judaism. She saves Moses. (Exodus 2, 15 – The Song of Miriam)

Deborah – She is one of God's chosen Judges. She hears the word of God and proclaims it. (Judges 4-5)

Huldah – She is a prophetess. She is asked by the religious reformer King Josiah for the Lord's word concerning the revival of the temple cult. She authenticates the rediscovered Book of the Law (Deuteronomy). She speaks the word of God directly to the high priests and royal officials. (2 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 34,)

Ruth – She is not Jewish by birth, she was from the neighbouring country of Moab. She is the symbol of God's calling to all people. She is an essential in the story of Salvation History as a mother of King David and eventually Saint Joseph. (The Book of Ruth)

Esther – She is a queen who saves her people. (The Book of Esther)

Judith – She is another heroic figure who saves her people. The story of Judith is in the Apocrypha and is a female version of David and Goliath (The Book of Judith)

Beyond the Gospels, the New Testament tells of the ministry of women in the first generation of the Church. We meet the prophetess daughters of S. Philip (Acts 21), Chloe who is the convenor of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1: 11), Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1) who S. Pauls describes as 'my fellow worker.' Other women named in the New Testament include Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Mary, Euodia, Syntyche and Priscilla (who is named before her husband). In 1 Timothy 5 a band of ministering widows are described who fulfil a ministry that is being financed by the Church.

Reflection and discussion

It is worth spending some time reading the lives of these great figures of our faith. As you read their stories try to understand how God was working through them especially in terms of how these are ministries of women.

The Order of Deaconesses

The scriptures tell of women as spiritual and political leaders, as those who speak the prophesies of God, and who minister in a wide variety of circumstances. Our faith will always have at its centre Mary, the mother of Our Lord, who had the highest vocation of any human. As we recall all of these ministries we see that none of them are of women-priests or -bishops. As we find in all the Biblical examples of the female vocation it has its own identity and graces. These ministries are no lesser because they are not priesthood, it is just that they are different.

At the beginning of Christianity an order of ministry for women was developed – deaconesses. We can perhaps find its origin in the band of women disciples who were intimately part of Our Lord's travelling ministry (Luke 8). From that large band of disciples, men and women, Christ chose twelve men to be His Apostles. The characteristic of the Apostles was that they were called by Christ to 'Follow me' and they do so in obedience.

Session Two Teaching Material continued...

The Biblical Roots of the Ministry of Women

The women who are followers do so not as a result of a command from Our Lord. They follow as those who have heard the message, have been healed or have responded to His touch of love. These women are symbols to us, not of obedience to a call but of what it is to be moved to deep devotion by a personal experience of the divine. The women disciples occupy a privileged position for they are close to Our Lord and wait upon Him. He ministers to them and they to Him.

Obedience is not absent from the feminine vocation – how could it be with the example of Mary who says, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord' – but we do find a difference in the primary motive of how the women find their vocation in comparison to the male Apostles. This starts to point us to one of the central truths and characteristics of women's ministry – it bears the symbol of freedom – a freedom found in the Holy Spirit.

Freedom and foot washing

A useful example of the difference between the Apostles and the women disciples is seen when we look at the stories in the gospels about foot washing. The Apostles' relation to Our Lord's actions are those of students to a tutor. They are made to participate in the action, its meaning is spelt out to them and they are commanded to imitate the example. In contrast when a woman washes the feet of Our Lord she does so in freedom, as her own act and as a sign of devotion. She washes Our Lord's feet with her tears and anoints them with precious spikenard. Her actions speak of penitence and responsive love and Our Lord says that her witness will never be forgotten. To those who criticise the woman Our Lord rebukes them, 'Let her alone,' a phrase that recalls freedom (S. Mark 14).

Freedom and the Gifts of the Spirit

Whereas we see that the core of the male apostolic ministry is the duty of being the symbols, with women we find the possibility of greater freedom and scope for a more responsive ministry. In the Early Church we find the deaconess being honoured as the Holy Spirit (Didiscalia, 3rd Century AD). She is distinct from bishops, priests and male deacons – she has her own sacred symbols to bring. She has her own charisma, indeed charisma, meaning the gifts of the Spirit, are all-important to understanding her ministry. The deaconess's identity is precisely the symbol of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. With this vocation of the Spirit she is not ordained into the apostolic household; she isn't and mustn't be institutionalised because her ministry may well be beyond the confines of the institution. The Spirit blows where it will. This ancient understanding was not to exclude women from the Church but to release them for ministry. Do we hear again Our Lord's words, 'Let her alone'? Another Early Church text, (The Apostolic Constitutions, 3rd Century AD) describes Pheobe, whom we meet in Acts, as the one whose vocation allowed her to minister to those in necessity.

Deaconess ministry is not primarily about the institution of the Church. It has a freedom to go out and to be responsive to need. The Spirit is ever active throughout creation – released from the institution the deaconess can witness to the Spirit's presence as she works in the Spirit's power. We can gain another insight into this ministry by the description of women as the doorkeepers (such as Chloe). It is a ministry of creating the doorway into the apostolic household and from them into the world.

Discussion

How might the institution of the Church be enlivened and challenged by this vision of a ministry that speaks of bearing the gifts of the Spirit to the world? What could such a ministry mean to those who live or work in your own parish?

A last thought: S. Mary Magdalene

S. Mary Magdalene was one of the closest disciples to Our Lord. We could well believe that if it had been Our Lord's will to have women as his Apostles (and thence as bishops and priest) he would have called her. We find though that Mary has a vocation that again points to the Spirit's freedom. This charisma we can see in the story the Resurrection. On the first Easter day when Mary recognizes Our Lord she seeks to cling to him. She wishes to restore the old relationship but he stays her with the words, 'Touch me not.' She is then given the Gospel message to carry to the Apostles, 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' She who had thought that earthly ties were all important is the first to learn the great truth of our faith – the Church is joined to the Father through the ascended Son and this movement allows the Spirit to be loosed in the Church. It is the power of that Spirit, as the link with the Son, which is the inspiring and defining characteristic of women's ministry. Mary Magdalene is not an Apostle and it's important that she isn't, as it would take away her significance. She can be iconic of the great transition towards the life of the Spirit.

Session Two Handout

Women's Ministry inspired by Scripture

Introduction

Do the Scriptures teach us of a distinctive feminine ministry that has its own graces?

The presence of male and female in creation

Women of ministry in the Old Testament

Rebecca, Rachel, Tamar, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Ruth, Esther, Judith

Reflection and discussion

It is worth spending some time reading the lives of these great figures of our faith. As you read their stories try to understand how God was working through them especially in terms of how these are ministries of women.

Women in the Early Church

- The Order of Deaconess
- Not called but responsive and receptive
- Freedom in the Holy Spirit
- The symbol of the gifts and life of the Holy Spirit

Women in the Early Church

- The Order of Deaconess
- Not called but responsive and receptive

Comparing the foot washing

- The Apostles are taught to imitate
- The woman acts out of devotion

Freedom and the Gifts of the Spirit

- The deaconess is not confined or institutionalised
- The Spirit is not confined or institutionalised
- The Spirit is ever active in creation
- 'Let her alone,' says Our Lord
- Women as the doorkeeper

Discussion

How might the institution of the Church be enlivened and challenged by this vision of a ministry that speaks of bearing the gifts of the Spirit to the world? What could such a ministry mean to those who live or work in your own parish?

S. Mary Magdalene

- Not an Apostles as she has her own vital witness and ministry
- She symbolises the angel's message in her being of the release and freedom of the Spirit into the Church.

Supplementary teaching material for Sessions One and Two

The teaching material may raise further questions. The following material is intended to support discussion. It anticipates the sort of questions that are often posed.

Jesus did not chose women as His Apostles because of the culture in which He lived.

It is true to say that men were more actively involved than women in leadership in the first century AD. The demands of family closely defined and limited women's lives. Some of the treatment of women at that time we would identify as prejudiced. When we seek to understand Our Lord's choice of twelve male Apostles from a wider band of disciples that included many women are we to understand this as indicative of the era and culture in which He lived?

It is helpful to reflect on the way in which women were included in the life and ministry of Our Lord. We find that He did not treat women as inferior to men. Supremely we have the example of Mary, who is the pattern of faithfulness and trust in her Son from the Annunciation to the Resurrection. She is in the midst of the first Church on the day of Pentecost. We find throughout the gospels a host of other women who similarly demonstrate a devotion to and understanding of Our Lord that is, in comparison, lacking in many of the male characters.

Joseph and Zachariah are presented as reticent and uncomprehending of the coming of the Saviour in the birth narratives. By contrast Elizabeth immediately recognised the child with whom Mary is pregnant. The Prophetess Anna in the Temple similarly recognises the infant Christ and straightaway speaks of Him to others. Throughout Our Lord's ministry He is accompanied by a band of women disciples who minister to Him and He to them. He frequently used the example of women in His parables and is completely unconcerned about breaking with social conventions in His interactions with women. It is the Apostles who are scandalised one day to discover Him talking with a lone woman at a well. Our Lord points to a widow at the Temple treasury and later to a woman weeping on His feet as those who show true responsiveness to God, over and against the clergymen of His day. During the Passion story the Apostles abandon, betray and deny Christ – the women disciples bravely accompany Him to Calvary. Even Pontius Pilate's wife has the insight to warn her husband to have nothing to do with condemning this man. It is to the three women called Mary who go to the tomb on Easter Day that the Good News of the Resurrection is first given. They are then the first messengers of the Gospel to others.

In the context of the Christ we meet in the gospels it is hard to believe that upon the important matter of forming the new priesthood in the choice of His Apostles He felt bound to act in a culturally conditioned way and choose only men. This would seem to contradict so much of what He did and said – unless we understand that His choice was not prejudiced but free

and deliberate. As we shall see later when we look at women's ministry, though not Apostles or priests, the Bible tells a rich story of the female vocation.

There is theological danger too in believing that Our Lord acted as a man of His age. It undermines our belief that He was (and is) God and as divine He acted always in a way that was perfect and sovereign. The gospels will always teach us that Christ was quite prepared openly to challenge social and religious conventions AND that He received as a gift from God twelve men as His apostles.

Christ did not chose women as His Apostles as the very notion of a female priest would have been unknown during His day.

Those who lived in the first century AD in Palestine, and indeed throughout the classical world, would have been very familiar with the concept and experience of women being priests. For many centuries priestesses had served the various pagan religions of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Some of the cults included the worship of female gods. During the early centuries of Christianity as the faith spread throughout this region there is evidence that some communities had women-priests. However, these were not orthodox Christian communities but ones defined by the Church as heretical such as the Gnostics and the Monanists.

The Bible teaches gender equality, so how can it be just that woman are excluded from the priesthood.

This is the point at which the various views held about the ordination of women are in agreement about some aspects but disagree on others. All should be able to agree that the Bible teaches equality and justice for both sexes. Where there is disagreement is about the nature of equality. Some will argue that equality means that men and women should be able to do exactly the same as each other because the sexes are interchangeable. Humans are essentially the same except for some biological differences. The other viewpoint, grounded in the historic faith, has taught that priesthood is not a matter of doing but of being. It's just not a question of whether women can do what a priest does. Rather it is a question of the very nature of creation as male and female. There is equality between the sexes and this is a radical equality that allows for difference. Equal in status and yet expressive of the male and female of creation. It is important that we don't confuse our thinking on this issue by becoming clichéd in our understanding of gender, for what we are seeking to discern is a spiritual identity that is God given and not one of human and cultural norms.

The Genesis story of creation speaks of our relationship with God and with each other. It describes in poetic language the interdependence and compatibility of the sexes that is not sameness. The story starts with a figure called Ha'adam, an unclearly gendered character. Man is created first in a division of Ha'adam. This first creation is not presented as

Supplementary teaching material for Sessions One and Two continued...

superior, nor is it a failed first attempt! The significance of the story in speaking initially of the creation of man before woman emphasises that it is God who creates, not humanity giving birth to itself. This teaches us of our relationship to God as our creator. Woman is created as 'helper' – the Hebrew word is ezer. It's a word that does not mean domestic helper and it does not imply either that the one who needs help is subordinate to the helper. Ezer means divine help. The creation of male and female identifies humans as the ones who bear God's help to each other. To be a helper completes us as humans, to be selfish leaves us incomplete and alone. The reference to the rib taken from Adam to form Eve again teaches equality and holiness. The equality of the creation is certain for it is only God who acts. Rib is a poor translation of the Hebrew tsela that means most often the side part of the Ark or of an altar. Man and woman are created from what is sacred within them.

This story of our creation emphasises the dignity and identity of each gender as God given. Ministry is not about representing humanity to God. God wouldn't be God if He needed that! Ministry is about representing the being and activity of God into His creation. In very essence from the moment of creation we are male and female. It seems very plausible that what God has given in creation should continue to be reflected in ministry.

As a culture we are still breaking free from centuries old social conventions that closely defined masculine and feminine. These are often merely man-made roles and have no bearing in understanding male and female within the divine order of creation. It will be an exciting theological exploration to rediscover what Genesis is teaching us and it is likely to challenge some modern notions that gender equality is based on inter-changeability. We are taught that difference and equality can go together and form a creative whole. We may be expectant that gender is indeed to be expressed specifically in Church Order as it has been since the beginning of created order.

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Galatians 3: 28 "There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus." Does this verse mean that the gender of a priest or bishop has no significance?

This teaching of S. Paul in Galatians is often used to explain that once we are 'in Christ' there can be no difference between humans and that this can be applied to our understanding of ordained ministry. Indeed to introduce difference could be to introduce an injustice. This however is to misunderstand S. Paul. He is certainly speaking about how through baptism (inclusion in Christ) we all enter spiritual unity receiving the same grace of God. This is granted to us regardless of any national, cultural, social or gender distinctions. The course of salvation history first started with Abraham and salvation had been believed for many centuries to be exclusive to the heirs of Abraham. S. Paul is teaching us that we can all be heirs and sons of Abraham – salvation is open to all. We all share the same status in the Father's house as heirs. Nowhere in Galatians does S. Paul mention ordained ministry, so it's hard to argue that we can apply this verse to this matter specifically. He is teaching us that through baptism we are all equally heirs of grace and salvation but this in no way means that God-given differences between humans somehow disappear. It challenges us to work for a radical equality that says, I will welcome and value difference and at the same time acknowledge that we are all of equal status in the Father's house.

Session Three Teaching Material and Handout

The Apostles and Their Ministry

We will need our Bibles constantly to hand, to look up the references and discuss as we go.

Prayer

Almighty God, the giver of all good gifts, who hast appointed divers Orders in thy Church: Give thy grace, we beseech thee, to all who are called to the same; and so fill them with the truth of thy doctrine, and endue them with purity of life, that they may faithfully serve thee, to the glory of thy Name and the benefit of thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

It is Julian of Norwich who reminds us that God has revealed to us just so much of Himself as is necessary for our salvation. "The rest is hidden and shut up from us." Perhaps in heaven we shall learn more, as we continue the "journey into love", as St Gregory of Nyssa, one of our great 4th century bishops, has described our eternal enjoyment of God. But here and now we must content ourselves with the images and symbols He has given us through Jesus our Lord in Holy Scripture: "The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." (1 John 4, v.14) The iconic image will always lead us back through the Son to the Father, into whose family the Church we were admitted at baptism.

Recap

In Part 1 of this course we looked at the vocation of the twelve Apostles, commissioned by Christ to carry out certain specific duties, and receiving from Him the iconic image to enable them to do so. The passages to ponder on are the last few verses of St Matthew's gospel, and also St John's gospel, ch. 20, v.21-23.

An icon - let us keep reminding ourselves because we in the Western Church are not familiar with the idea – does not merely represent or stand in for an absent person. An icon makes the absent one present. So the Apostles make Christ present in the Church. And Christ, as the icon of the Father, makes the Father present: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14: 8,9)

Whatever next?

The Church expands, and the Apostles are overwhelmed with work. They cannot be everywhere at once, and their numbers are depleted through death. We must look in the New Testament to see how this problem was solved. There are clues all over the place.

Acts ch.6, v.1-6 is a good place to start, as it is widely seen as the beginning of the order of **Deacons**. It is worth looking at v.6 to see how they were commissioned to "serve tables." It sounds as if the Apostles were shunting off the more menial tasks onto them! But no. We remember Christ's words (Luke 22:27), "I am among you as one that serves." Another important passage is Luke 12:37. The Deacons were certainly doing Christ's own work. The first chapter of Titus tells us what sort of men the Deacons should be. Philippians is addressed to the Church with "the bishops and deacons."

So we pick up the word "**bishops**". It is not always clear in the NT whether "bishop" and "elder" are two words for the same person. For instance, Titus (1:5-7) is told to "ordain elders in every city...for a bishop must be blameless." So what is an "elder"? In the Greek NT the word is "**presbyter**" which translates as "**elder**" and which also gives us our word "**priest**". (A parish priest in the Roman Church lives in a presbytery.) James in his epistle (5:14) exhorts the sick to "call for the elders of the church". He assumes that there will be elders to call for.

The Bishop

Our word "bishop" comes from a Greek word meaning "**overseer**", the one in general overall charge. So did a missionary Apostle, having founded a church, ordain a number of elders from whom one was chosen and ordained to be the chief elder (bishop)? This could be the case with regard to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:14. Or did he ordain a bishop (one would guess that Titus was the Bishop of Crete, as is generally assumed) who ordained elders?

In any case, this **Ministry of the Bishops, the Priests and the Deacons** can be described to be in place in the churches of the New Testament.

Session Four Teaching Material and Handout

Zooming in on Bishops (picking up on Pastoral oversight, Ordination, Icon)

Prayer

O Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle St Peter many excellent gifts, and commandedst him earnestly to feed thy flock: Make, we beseech thee, all Bishops and Pastors diligently to preach thy holy Word and thy people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Qualifications for becoming a Bishop

These are spelt out in Titus 1:5-9 and in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Don't miss the emphasis on the **bishop as father to the local church!**

"Overseer" sounds rather a grim word. But St Paul reminds us in Acts 20:28 what this **"oversight" means: to be a shepherd to the flock** which Christ has bought with his own blood. And in 1 Peter 5:1-4, where the Apostle is addressing bishops/elders, he spells out what oversight is.

Oversight is closely connected with shepherding. Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep" (John 21:15,16). In 1 Peter 2:25 Christ is called "the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls", and in 5:4 He is "the chief Shepherd." This **pastoral care** is marked by the sign or **symbol of the shepherd's crook** which our bishops carry today at key moments, such as at an Ordination.

The Bishop Ordains

Ordination is done through the laying-on of hands as the Holy Spirit transmits His grace to the newly ordained. The physical contact is important. The Bishop puts his hands on the head of the new Priest as a sign that he is a new link in the chain that connects the Priest to the Bishop to the Apostles to Christ to the Father. This is not a fancy bit of history, merely what was done long ago. Think of the ordinations you may have gone to – if you were near enough to see!

The physical sign shows us what is happening. It has both meaning and power. That is why we call Ordination a "Sacrament".

The Bishop as Icon.

St Ignatius, Bishop of Syrian Antioch, is a splendid example of one of our earliest bishops. He died shortly after 100 AD, and wrote letters to the churches he would pass on his forced journey to Rome where he faced martyrdom in the "games" in the arena, the grisly ruins of the Colosseum visited by so many tourists.

His stern letters, with an emphasis on the Eucharist, and on the ordained ministry and its meaning, shed light on what we read in the NT. He is so close in time to the Apostles that he could have known some of them personally. He must have known the Apostolic teaching perfectly, far more so than any modern scholars or theologians, because he was there! – part of the apostolic scene.

For those with access to the Internet, Google will find his letters for you to read in full. The short quotations below are from his letters to the Trallians and the Magnesians.

He writes:

"Let all respect the Bishop as a type of [God] the Father" (Trallians 3)

"You are in subjection to the Bishop as to Jesus Christ" (Trallians 2)

"The Presbyters yield to the Bishop, yet not to him but to the Father of Jesus Christ the Bishop of all" (Magnesians 3)

"Let all respect the Deacons as Jesus Christ, even as the Bishop is a type of the Father, and the Presbyters as the council of God and the college of the Apostles. Without these, the name of 'Church' is not given" (Trallians 3)

These passages invite and claim our deep attention. Ignatius is saying that when Christians are assembled (and in particular for the Eucharist) this iconic Ministry is the guarantor of the presence of God the Father in their midst. This we believe today just as we have always believed. Whatever form of service our local church uses for the Eucharist, we have all made a proclamation in words such as: "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord", or "The Lord is here! His Spirit is with us."

> So it is important that the Bishop is himself, bodily (as Jesus is), a sign to remind us of Fatherhood. The symbol and the message connect – as we saw in Part 1.

It is this Ministry, and only this, says Ignatius, which makes a group of Christians **"Church", God's family with the Father in their midst.**

Session Four Teaching Material and Handout

Zooming in on Bishops (picking up on Pastoral oversight, Ordination, Icon) continued...

What happened later?

We all know that the high standard of what a bishop should be, was not kept up as the centuries passed. History is full of lurid accounts which we can pass over here. Corruption in high places was of course one among several of the causes of the Reformation. At the break with Rome the Church of Rome claimed that the Church of England had severed the apostolic line of bishops and so was no longer part of the universal Church of Christ. The CofE claimed that her bishops were properly consecrated by valid bishops. The dispute has never been resolved, although we were once very close to it, almost there, but agreement foundered on the question of ordaining women.

This brings us to a crucial point in our discussion. We often hear it said that the Bishop is the “focus of unity”.

.....

It might be felt convenient to carry straight on, or else to pause here, and devote a further session to the remainder of Session Four.

.....

Prayer

O God, the light of the faithful and Shepherd of souls, who didst set Bishops in thy Church to feed thy sheep by word and example: Grant us, we pray thee, to keep the faith as we have received it through their teaching, and to follow in their footsteps; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Bishop as Focus of Unity

What does that mean? You may like to suggest some answers to this question. One obvious answer must be that the Bishop holds the Church together, united in basic belief and in action, fit for its mission to the world.

What that belief and action are, can be traced directly back to our Lord himself. We have already looked at the closing verses of St Matthew’s Gospel, and will remember that He commanded the Apostles to teach the things which He had taught them. They have **received** teaching from Him, and must **pass it on** exactly.

This highly important Apostolic function devolves on the Bishops who take the place of the Apostles. We can find huge emphasis placed on this throughout the New Testament. St Paul, himself an Apostle, albeit joining the group rather late in the day, insists repeatedly that he has **passed on** the teaching which he has **received**, and exhorts the new Bishops to do the same. Here are some passages of Scripture which show just how important this task is:

I Corinthians 11:23, and 15:1-3, II Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6, I Timothy 4:16 and 6:20, II Timothy 2:2 and 4:1-5, Titus 1:9. Plenty to think about, as time allows!

Parish Priests, acting as “extensions” of the Bishop, must **pass on the received teaching** to their parishioners, whether from the pulpit, in study groups, or in “taking the confirmation class” as we say, teaching the basics of the faith to the confirmands.

The Bishop confirms

When the confirmands are ready, the Bishop, as Shepherd of souls with pastoral staff in hand, comes **to confirm them in the faith they have received** and learnt, and to unite them, by the laying on of hands and through the Holy Eucharist, into the one universal Church. All eyes are on the Bishop. Even in a very crowded church, and if you are not very tall, you can see where he is as the procession enters: first you see the Cross moving above the heads of the crowd, and at the back of the procession you will be able to see the tall mitre of the Bishop.

The work of a Bishop

This is set out very fully and clearly in The Consecration of Bishops in the Book of Common Prayer. When we think of bishops, how many of us have a picture in our minds of a Church of England bishop? But towards the end of the service, at the actual consecration, the Archbishop says, “Receive the Holy Ghost, for the office and work of a Bishop in the Church of God.” This is immensely wider than the Church of England. As we said earlier, we were at one time very close to agreement with Rome that our bishops are indeed “real” bishops. But the possibility of women as bishops has put that agreement on to a very distant horizon. So a woman bishop becomes immediately a cause and sign of disunity, instead of a focus of unity. And is she a symbol of fatherhood? And if not, is it indeed a church, over which she presides? And if not...?

Session Four Teaching Material and Handout

Zooming in on Bishops (picking up on Pastoral oversight, Ordination, Icon) continued...

What now?

There is a minority in the Church of England which is in agreement with the Church of Rome and also with the Orthodox Churches. So this minority has enormous backing in “the holy Church throughout all the world.”

Discussion

Should this minority be allowed an honoured place in the Church of England?

In discussing this question we must always strive for peace and unity and charity.

Prayer at close of discussion

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner stone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Essentials concerning the Bishop

- As Icon of God the Father:
he is father of the local Church
- As Shepherd of souls:
he ordains and confirms
- As the focus of unity he is responsible for:
Keeping the faith
Guarding the faith
Teaching the faith

Supplementary Material to Sessions Three and Four

Notes mainly for the Convenor of the group, that may aid discussion

1.

There are many Biblical references to be looked up, read and talked over, with the aim that all should become familiar with the foundation documents of the faith. But there may arise objections to so much reliance on the Bible, e.g.

■ “All this is out of date. We have the Holy Spirit who, Jesus said, would lead us into all truth. Much has changed since Jesus’ day, so we don’t have to read what he said. We have to listen to what the Spirit is saying now.”

This raises questions for the objectors to answer: Who is Jesus, to be so easily dismissed? Can the Son and the Spirit say different things, so dividing God against himself? How do you know that “the Spirit” you claim to hear is the Spirit of God?

■ “The Bible, especially the OT, is primitive and barbaric. If it says that only men can be priests, it also says that women must be stoned for adultery. It’s time we dropped it.”

Answer: The Bible is the history of our salvation. The OT shows God leading a primitive and barbaric people through a long and painful education, until they realise that they are morally corrupt and in need of a Saviour. As Christians, we have accepted the Saviour, Jesus, and are continuing our education with him and in him, in the Church. So the whole Bible speaks to the human condition, and is in fact the history of each one of us – from the barbaric to the heights of the moral law to redemption and sanctification. It should be our most prized possession.

■ The Bible was written by men. Research shows that in the early Church there were women priests and Bishops. Men suppressed them.”

Answer: You can’t have it both ways! The fact is that the pattern of the Church as we have it in the NT prevailed over other ideas. If the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth, how can you attribute the NT model to men, and all other ideas, which did not prosper, to the Holy Spirit?

2.

The reference to Julian of Norwich at the beginning of Session Three may give rise to assertions about this lady mystic, e.g.

■ “Julian said that Christ is our Mother. She brought out the feminine side of God.”

Answer: We don’t know whether God has a feminine side. We only know, in this life, that for the purpose of our salvation God has chosen to reveal himself to us as Father, through God the Son.

■ If Julian did say that Christ is our Mother, does her word carry more weight and authority than the message of the Son of God himself?

■ Actually, Julian exhorts us to turn to “Holy Church, and find there our beloved Mother.” She also records that Jesus told her, “All the good that is done for you in Holy Church, it is I.” In other words, all the benefits that are ours through the Church add up to the one word ‘Jesus’. Thus, in Julian’s ecstatic “logic”, if the Church is Jesus, and the Church is our Mother, therefore Jesus is our Mother. However, Julian is clear headed enough to refer always to Jesus as “he, him, my lord”. So she has no illusions about a feminine God.