

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.

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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.