



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 19 November 2017

What About The Women? - Helen Singleton

Helen wrote up her notes for two articles in the church magazine (Wider Horizons). I have combined them here.

Last year we used a set of readings chosen by the Circuit from the Old Testament where only 8 out of the 44 featured stories included women: Eve; Moses and his midwives, sister and mother; Rehab and the spies; Deborah; Ruth and Naomi; Jezebel; Elisha and the 'unnamed' widow; Esther. I also checked two books of children's Bible stories, both Old and New Testaments: the Beginners Bible has 10/46 stories featuring women; another has 13/49.

In the New Testament there are more women featured: 22 women in the Gospels had a contact with Jesus, not all are named, but he clearly valued the women in his life. Significantly after the resurrection, Jesus appeared first to the women in the garden and they were entrusted to share the message to the rest of the disciples. In Paul's letter to the Romans Ch 16, he names a list of 8 women who were part of the early church: Phoebe, Prisca, Aquila, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, mother of Rufus, Julia, Nerius' sister. Not sure what happened after those days?

Liz Adekunle, Church of England Archdeacon, was a speaker at Greenbelt Festival this year. She said that "Women continue to be marginalised in every sphere of the world. This includes Church life in the broadest sense. Because of the patriarchy, women's stories are not featured - only 1% of women in the Bible speak - women are not seen as important. We should think about the way we use and interpret the Bible. In the Lectionary - biblical texts featuring women tend to be omitted or made optional, central characters are men, stories are told from a male perspective, it is a male centred bible. Where women are featured the emphasis is often on marriage and children, traditional views of women, this is only one aspect of women's lives." However, she also said that "the Bible has given, and continues to give women voice and hope, stories of women's resistance and courage can be told and how we interpret the stories can shape the way we think. Some people criticise and say we should not interpret the Bible differently, but this enhances the literature, is creative and empowers women". She said "Faith is richer when everyone has a value and are not marginalised"

Another speaker on the subject is John Bell of the Iona Community. He spent last year reading the bible only where the story of women was included, and he tells of how, through this, he met a range of people and spiritual witness. He also believes that the lectionary, created by men, reduces the number of stories of women in the Bible that we hear by not including them. Moreover, the women we hear about seem only to be of two types: either virtuous virgins or those of low repute, often prostitutes; however, this does give them value in God's story. There are actually four women included in the genealogy of Jesus: Rehab, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. Marginalised women are validated in the Bible as their stories are told, even when they may not be named, such as the 'woman at the well'.

Many of the men whose stories are told often have flaws; they may be named but do not come out of the stories well, such as David in the Old Testament and Peter in the Gospels. John Bell said that God often calls women to stand up to injustice and against the abuse of power – and that maybe this is why they are not included in the Lectionary today?”

The language we use is important - generally nowadays we do use more inclusive, non-gendered versions of the Bible. In Housegroups we looked at the book of James: Chapter 2 in my 1970's Jerusalem Bible starts each section with 'My brothers' but more enlightened versions now use 'My dear friends'. This also applies to the hymns and songs we sing, where 'male' words are used, particularly in older hymns, when I can feel irritated, even excluded, and my discomfort at the words used can get in the way of worship.

God in our worship and study is described as male, in prayers, hymns and songs: He, God the Father, Lord, King - but why? We could use female or genderless terms for God. We imagine God in our image and we are not all male! We should not restrict our idea of God but should be allowed freedom to describe God creatively. Feminine versions of the divine are not unknown in anthropology. There are descriptions of God as a 'Creator Mother' or Amma (not Abba). There are theologians and writers of liturgy and prayers from a feminine perspective, such as Nicola Slee and Janet Morley, who use descriptions of God as a Creator Mother or Amma, not Abba Father.

To take these ideas one step further some artists have explored the Bible story creatively: there is a sculpture that caused controversy when displayed in a church in America with the artist Edwina Sandys (1975) portraying a female Christ on the cross - Christa. This may be a step too far for some, but it is a way of exploring our faith, thinking differently and creatively looking at God's story. You can find certain parts of the Bible that describe the feminine, nurturing, creator aspects of God (eg the wisdom literature and Song of Songs), and there are images of God as female (eg the mother hen and her chicks). Look out for more examples of the feminine within the Bible.

Then there are other issues that we are becoming aware of: those of us who do not identify as male or female, or who wish to express themselves in a non-binary way – this may be on a spectrum of gender – so we now have the freedom to be who we really are and not conform to rigid identities, perhaps to fulfil our God-given identity! The use of male and female language becomes important, so that we are inclusive of all. Male and female are no longer rigidly defined and perhaps correspondingly, we should not have a fixed/agreed description of God? I think we need to continue to challenge ideas of gender both within worship and in our lives; our children and grandchildren will require us to do this, or we will be left behind.

A challenge – look up the stories in the Bible of the women you may not have met yet and I will continue to ask “What about the women?”

At the Melting Pot discussion there was talk of whether we could take part in worship where God was described in a female way – we thought that people would need to be prepared for the event and perhaps there could be a discussion about our reactions to this idea. What do you think?