

**A sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry at
An Advent Service of Lament and Hope
on 2nd December Coventry Cathedral**

John 12.1-8

Introduction

When it was suggested that we might use this reading today I wondered whether that was such a good idea, and whether all this talk about perfume would simply reinforce rather unhelpful gender stereotypes. Then I remembered that my fourteen year old son is giving great attention to the exact aroma he should choose for his first bottle of aftershave. And so I thought, well maybe the reading will work after all – there's nothing exclusively and absolutely feminine about preoccupations with perfume.

Partnership in the gospel

Once over this little question mark, I began to have another set of misgivings about the appropriateness of the reading. Does it reinforce deeper gender stereotypes which, in an image that I gather is being commended for use next Sunday as a sort of protest, ties an apron onto women never to be removed? Here we have Martha serving the meal, Mary anointing Jesus' feet and Lazarus waiting – like men have done for generations before and since – waiting at the table for his dinner.

Then I thought that, at risk of walking into areas where I'm likely to put my foot down a big hole, it is nonetheless worth saying something about male and female complementarity. I know that that this is an area open to much abuse and to a sanctioning or sanctifying roles in society that are features of culture – and sometimes a somewhat unredeemed culture – rather than belonging to the redemption of the new creation.

At the same time, the picture of the household of Mary, Martha and Lazarus gathered around Jesus is a very beautiful image not only of the Church but of the leadership of the Church. Indeed, for those of us who believe that it is very right that women should take a full part in the leadership of the Church through priestly and episcopal ministry, the – let me put it this way – co-humanity of the sexes is an important motivation.

What I mean by that is that the original creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God was not just of the male – Adam – but of the male *and* female – Adam *and* Eve. Adam was incomplete humanity without the helper and partner of Eve. Adam needed what the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that would have been used in many of the early Christian communities called, 'a helper equal in stature to him'. And Eve, by definition needed the same (Genesis 2.18-25). Humanity was created co-humanity: 'male and female he created them, in the image of God he created them' (Genesis 1.27) and charged them to care for the earth as its priests and overseers.

It is this original partnership between male and female that we see breaking out into the order of life that Jesus brings in his word and work for the kingdom as women receive a new dignity in his presence, even the honour of preparing his body for burial. We find this new order of the kingdom being doctrinally defined by Paul as he declares the oneness of men and women in Christ (Galatians 3.28). And we find it emerging in the practice of the Church, most visibly in the New Testament in Rome where men and women appear to be partnered in the ministry and leadership of the various house churches of that city (see Romans 16). It is the co-humanity of men and women helping and partnering each other in God's work that motivates many to see the Church better reflect the restoration of the order of creation in the new creation of the Church.

Something stolen

So for those reasons, I thought this story about a household of God with men and women would be worth having. But then I had third thoughts about it. I was concerned in case the reference to Judas trying to stop Mary serving Jesus would be offensive to those who supported the vote against the legislation for the ordination of women as bishops.

I was concerned for two reasons. The first is that it might suggest that difference in opinion of roles of men and women in the Church is a male – female opposition: the male Judas wanting to restrict the ministry of the female Mary. That would not be helpful, for there are many women in our Church who were not comfortable with the legislation as it was and approved of its downfall.

I was also concerned about this reading because those who supported the vote against were doing so out of a deep love for Jesus and for his welcome of all – male and female – into the saving, liberating, redeeming love of God and life and mission of the Church, the new creation in the Body of Christ. This is not the moment to explain or analyse the exact reasons why people voted against the legislation but it is essential to recognise each other as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ and that we are bound together as members of Christ for Christ is bound to each one of us, and that reasons for not supporting the legislation were not about holding women back from the life and love of Jesus.

But I decided that the reading would still be a good one to have because – *notwithstanding everything I have just said* – I have no doubt that the vote felt to most of our beloved women priests and to a large number of women believers and to a significant proportion of women beyond the life of the Church that some members of the Church – many of them indeed men – were saying to women, “thus far and no further”. Be a Martha and serve at table but not a Mary who tends and touches the body of Christ with her body. I think only this explains the public sense of outrage in what only is in reality, and was only ever going to be a temporary hiccup in ecclesiastical proceedings. That is not how it felt even by women who expected the vote to go down. They felt as if something had been stolen from them.

This is a main reason why we are holding this service today. We are here to acknowledge that deep experience of hurt at being held back from a costly

service to Christ, and to stand with all our sisters in Christ and in the world who are feeling badly let down and wondering whether they really belong.

All we can do is to repeat to you some of Jesus' words at Mark's account of the incident.

'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'
(Mark 14.6,9)

Advent People of Hope

There are two other reasons for holding this service today. They are hinted at in the haunting incident that follows this one:

So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. (John 12.10-11).

As the Church we are witnesses of the resurrection, the new creation. Lazarus was a sign of the resurrection. His restored life was a sign of the coming resurrection of Jesus which was, in turn, the sign that the new creation had come.

We must not allow debates and disputes and disagreements in the Church to tear us apart. In a time of persecution of the Church the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts its readers to 'pursue peace with everyone... [and see] that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled' (Hebrews 12.14-15). That is why Bishop John will be leading us in the Litany of Reconciliation and in the sharing of the peace. That is what Christians do when they disagree and when things have gone wrong. They say together, 'Father, forgive' and 'Peace be with you'. For that's what Jesus did, and we are the Body of Christ.

The other reason we are holding this service today – and why we are holding it on Advent Sunday – is that we are the people of hope: advent hope, hope in the coming of God's kingdom, hope in the fulfilment of God's purposes, hope in the coming of Jesus, hope that the Church will one day be presented blameless by Christ to the Father. Wherever we stand about the decisions of General Synod we must be united in our common hope.

Conclusion

And as people of hope in the world-transforming power of Jesus' death and resurrection we can do no better than rejoice in the witness of the Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus and prepared the body of Jesus for burial and rejoice in the Mary who heard her name on the lips of the risen Christ in her grief in the garden and was told by Jesus to: 'go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"' (John 20.17).