

## Should Women Be Bishops?

Should anyone be a bishop, or a priest, come to that? Most religions have holy people set apart for spiritual purposes. The list includes not only priests and prophets, but also shamans and witchdoctors, sibyls and soothsayers, vestal virgins and temple prostitutes. The thought is that some people are set apart. That is what the word “holy” means, set apart, set apart for God. Holy people mediate between God and ordinary common humanity. They intercede. They bless. They curse. They deliver oracles. They offer sacrifice. They dream dreams. They advise in the light of divine counsel. They issue the judgments of God.

The thought is that human beings need to relate to God but that most people do not have the ability to do so directly. It may be that they are too sinful, too dull in their perceptions, too timid even, but the thought is that people can only come to God through intermediaries – special people set apart for the purpose. Such people may have been specially chosen. They might come from priestly families. There might well be rites of initiation and a long apprenticeship. However it works, certain people are set apart, regarded as holy, in order to act as intermediaries between God and ordinary humanity.

We are probably most familiar with the model in the Old Testament. Only those of the tribe of Levi are ministers. Within the tribe of Levi, only the descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother, are priests. The high priests are Aaron’s direct descendants. Priests offer the people’s sacrifices. They approach God directly on behalf of the people. They intercede. They pronounce God’s blessing on the faithful and curses on God’s enemies. Using the insights they receive from God, the priests have both medical and legal functions. The only person ever allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, is the high priest and he goes in only once a year, offering sacrifices to atone both for himself and for the people.

Nevertheless the whole people of Israel are considered to be holy. At Mount Sinai, immediately after the Exodus, Israel is described as a royal priesthood, a holy nation. As well as priests of Aaron’s line, God calls men to be prophets and kings. He pours out His Holy Spirit on craftsmen and artists engaged in creating objects for worship. Potentially, the Holy Spirit is available to all God’s people.

In principle, every Israelite man, woman and child stands before God. In a sense the whole of Israel mediates between God and the rest of the world.

This limitation of priesthood to authorised ministers has a number of functions. God is holy and should always be approached with reverence and awe, with a fear that matures into sublime love. Like marriage, God’s presence is not to be entered into *unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly* to satisfy ourselves and our own desires, but *reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God*. Moreover, religion is a very powerful force. Some of the most appalling atrocities committed by human beings have been done in the name of religion. Priestly power is all too easily abused. Wrong ideas about religion give us suicide bombers, human sacrifice, the Inquisition, Crusades, etc etc. Human society without God is pretty dreadful. Witness Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China and Hitler’s Germany. Where religion is misdirected, we can go just as wrong. So the idea of having a separate priestly caste is to try to create conditions in which only those who approach God with due reverence

enter into His presence and that the power and influence which come from communion with the divine are used to His glory and for the benefit of the human race, not for those diabolical purposes for which religion is so often abused.

Christianity is different. We believe that God is so holy that only one human being is worthy to enter into His presence. The rest of us are too defiled by sin to stand in the presence of the thrice holy God. Only Jesus may enter into the sanctuary. He intercedes for us. He blesses us. He pours out the Holy Spirit on all believers. He judges all those who rebel against God. He offers sacrifice on behalf of us all. The only sacrifice capable of reconciling God and creation, the only true Atonement, is the one perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice whose effect is eternal and therefore unrepeatable, the sacrifice which Jesus Himself offers, the sacrifice of Himself offered on the Cross.

We believe that if we confess our sins and are baptised we become members of Christ. We become both a royal priesthood and a living sacrifice because we are the Body of Christ. We fulfil the true destiny of ancient Israel. We are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, mediating God to the world. We have different functions, different ways of serving Him, different talents, different opportunities, but we all have the same Holy Spirit filling us with Christ's virtues and giving us the gifts which enable us to do His work in the world. Because that is the point. God sent Jesus because He so loves the world. Jesus sends us to complete His Mission. We are the Body of Christ and it is our task to proclaim the Good News throughout the world and to bring in God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. We spoke last week about what a lot there is to do if all humanity, all human beings, are to fulfil their vocation as the children of God. We are one with Christ in Baptism. Our communion with Him is renewed and sustained in the weekly Eucharist and in daily prayer, Christian fellowship and Bible reading. Our task is huge, but it is God's work and we are called to do it, not on our own, but in Christ and Christ in us. This is the ministry of all God's people, of all the baptised. All Christians are priests in this sense. We all have access to God in Jesus Christ. We all have the Holy Spirit Who empowers us, with Jesus, to call God our Father. We are all His children, His holy children, His ministers, His servants, His friends, commissioned with the task of completing Christ's work for the world.

Within the priesthood of all believers it was soon found necessary to designate particular people with particular offices and responsibilities. There were apostles and evangelists. There were prophets and pastors and teachers. There were deacons with special responsibility to minister to the poor and sick. The early church needed leaders to make sure that the teaching was correct. They needed discipline. They needed a focus for unity. Soon, as well as deacons, there were people appointed with special responsibility for leadership. In the New Testament, in the original Greek, these are referred to as *ἐπισκοποι* and *πρεσβυτεροι*. These words are conventionally translated *bishops* and *elders*. It is important, however, to realise how these offices have evolved since New Testament times and that these words have connotations today which St Paul would never have thought of.

It would appear that church government was developing during the New Testament period and there is no one pattern. However, in a very short space of time afterwards, things coalesced into more or less what we have today. The Bishop was the head of the Church

under Christ in every city where there was a Christian community. He was prayerfully chosen by the community in the belief that he was also God's choice. The bishop was responsible for mission, unity, order and sound teaching. The Christian community is the Eucharistic Community. In Holy Communion we proclaim Christ's Death until he comes again. Participation in the Sacrament both symbolises and effects our union with Christ and with one another, His Body, on earth and in Heaven. In the context of Communion we hear the Bible read and preached and in penitence lament our failure to conform to its precepts, and receive grace to be better Christians, more effectively functioning as members of Christ's Body in the world. As a royal priesthood in union with Christ, the Christian Church re-presents His sacrifice, our atonement, and offers itself, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice. For these reasons, the Bishop always presides at the Holy Communion.

As time went on and the church grew, there would be a larger number of Christian communities in a city and the surrounding area. In these parishes, the bishop, επισκοπος, would delegate to his πρεσβυτεροι his functions of responsibility for mission, unity order and sound teaching. On behalf of the bishop, the πρεβυτερος would preside at the Eucharist and lead the local church and that is more or less the pattern which, much modified, has survived to the present day. It is perhaps unfortunate that English and Latin use the same word when translating πρεβυτερος, the New Testament co-worker with the bishop, and ιερευσ which is the word for the Old Testament priest. In English and Latin πρεβυτερος and ιερευσ are both rendered *priest, sacerdos* and that does lead to a certain amount of confusion. To put it simply, Christ is our only high priest, αρχιερευσ. In Christ all baptised Christians are priests ιερευσ of God, commissioned to fulfil Christ's priestly ministry in the world. Within that priesthood of all believers, some are called to holy orders, to be bishops, επισκοποι, priests, πρεβυτεροι, or deacons, διακονοι.

Should women, therefore, be bishops? It is clear that the ministry of bishop and priest is so closely linked that the question of women bishops is much the same as the question of women priests only, perhaps, more so. Should women, therefore, be priests in the sense of elders, πρεσβυτεροι? All Christian women are priests in the sense that they are ιερευσ, just as are all Christian men.

The argument for women priests goes something like this. The only essential difference between men and women is their potential to become fathers or mothers. In every other respect, men and women are equal and equivalent and ought to have equal opportunities in their choice of career and other life choices. In many areas of life, equal opportunities between the sexes are quite rightly enforced by Law. We have male midwives and female fire-fighters. God made men and women in His own image. St Paul teaches that there is neither male nor female in Christ any more than there is Jew or Gentile, slave or free person. Jesus gave women equal respect with men and women had important roles in supporting His ministry and as witnesses of the Resurrection. There are some very significant women leaders in the Old and New Testaments and throughout the history of the Church. If the priest takes the part of Jesus presiding at the Eucharist representing all humanity, then it is important that women as well as men should function as priests in the Church. Our failure to ordain women impairs our unity with denominations such as Methodism, which regard the ministry of women as essential to the witness of the Church. In a world in which most

people regard it as a self evident truth that men and women are equal, it damages the Church's credibility if we refuse women equal rights with men in the ministry.

The argument against women priests goes something like this. The differences between men and women are more profound than the mechanics of reproduction. Common sense and experience tell us that men and women are different in lots of ways. Most human cultures have assigned different roles to men and women. How can we be so confident that we are right and they are all wrong? Maybe men and women are not equivalent and equally suited to every career. Perhaps male midwives and female fire-fighters are not such a good idea after all. The Bible certainly teaches that men and women are equally created in God's image and equally redeemed in Christ, but neither the Bible nor the Church, for most of its 2,000 year history, has deduced from that that men and women should have the same jobs and fulfil identical roles. There have been great women leaders in both the Bible and Church history, but they were always exceptions, never the rule. Jesus respected women as much as He respected men, but He assigned them different roles. He never made a woman an apostle. It was St Paul who insisted that women and men were equal in Christ and he worked closely with some very able women leaders, but he still asserted that women should not exercise the sort of authority which would come to be exercised by bishops and priests. We have to be very cautious about treating the Christian priest as an icon of Christ, even when he is presiding at the Eucharist. Insofar as the priest represents Christ, well, Christ was a man, and there is no suggestion that He does not represent women equally with men at the Throne of God. Having women priests impairs our unity with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, who are not only more numerous than Methodists, but also much closer to us Anglicans in their understanding of ministerial priesthood generally. If the world cannot comprehend our refusal to offer equal opportunities to women and men, well, the Church sometimes has to be distinct from the world – as much for the world's sake as the Church's.

What you decide will depend on how much weight you give to these considerations. Some people incline towards the Bible and to what the Church has always taught. Others incline towards interpreting scripture and tradition in the light of modern thought. It is a continuum, a spectrum, and we are all located somewhere on that spectrum. At one extreme, no-one can live as if nothing had changed since biblical times. At the other extreme, neither can anyone claim to have anything to offer as a Christian if he writes off all that has been revealed in the past and simply derives his values from contemporary secularism. We are all located somewhere on the spectrum. We celebrate our unity as we acknowledge our differences. God has no doubt included *all sorts and conditions* in His Church for a purpose, because we are all needed.

What we must not do is to allow differences of opinion to damage the royal priesthood of all believers. We must preserve our unity with Christ and with one another. There is a desperate world out there which needs the priestly ministry of the whole people of God. So we pray for guidance for ourselves and for one another and especially for our leaders. We respect and love the people with whom we feel our integrity compels us to disagree. We patiently await God's time for the Truth to be finally revealed. And we cleave to Christ and to His Church, passionately and wholeheartedly serving God in His world by the light of the understanding that each one of us has received.