

GOD AND MAN AND WOMAN

If I say: I BELIEVE THAT GOD MADE MAN AND WOMAN OUT OF LOVE.....

I am probably making a statement which most, if not all members of MWG would agree with, and yet I am making a highly contentious statement for the simple reason that I am talking about three mysteries:

the mystery of God
the mystery of gender
and the mystery of love.

In fact, I am talking about four mysteries, because I began with the words

I believe

... and belief is also a matter of mystery.

The trouble with mysteries is that we either stand silent in the face of them – like Job, overcome by the insight God's words offer him into the creative process, or we try through language to describe and discuss them.

And when we describe a mystery – which is in essence undefinable by human language, we run the risk of our interpretation or our spin taking the place of the *res ipsa*.. the mystery itself.

So.. my understanding of God - my theology, if you like - becomes definitive of God.. or my understanding of love.. based on limited experience and a few books... becomes - for me - the sum total of what love is.

And when I engage with someone else whose understanding of, whose description of, whose language about the mystery (be it God or love) is different from mine, I may be threatened and become defensive... especially if by dint of power or race or gender I am one of the dominant or privileged class whose security depends on not being contradicted someone I perceive as inferior.

I begin in this slightly philosophical or obtuse way because I believe that behind MWG is a history of a dominant elite- male clergy in the main having their idea of God and of love and of gender tightly sewn up for so long that when other voices- be they women's voices or the voices of the marginalized suggest an alternative interpretation or description of these great mysteries, the dominant male religious culture feels threatened and defends not God or gender or love, but its hitherto unquestioned understanding of what these mysteries are about.

But let me now move quickly to something much more substantial... the Garden of Eden.

The trouble as well as the bliss starts in Eden. It is not for nothing that it comes at the beginning of the Bible and has been for centuries a war zone between 7 day creationists and their more liberal counterparts.

We discover two sources of endless dispute in Eden... the first that God is a person.

We know this because God is depicted as a peeping Tom who walks in the garden and much to Adam's displeasure engages him in a conversation about what he has just done.

For God (the first great mystery) to be a person, God- for human understanding- must have a gender or at least be spoken of in the third person. I and YOU or THOU is OK as long as we are talking to God or God to us, but if we want to talk about God objectively, we have to go into the third person... Unless we are speaking in, for example, an African language where the third person is the same for male or female, we have to settle for he or she for, most certainly, God is not an it.

But if the language culture is Greek or Latin, then the standards for talking about other deities will apply to this God. So, being a supreme deity like Zeus or Apollo, God becomes male. And even if... as in the case of the Spirit, the gender in the source language (Hebrew) is female... RUACH... when that comes into Greek and Latin and ultimately English, it is their gendering of the Spirit as male which prevails.

Now of course, it is not as simple as this. And yet, at the heart it is as simple as this... if God is a personal God who communicates... whose voice is heard, whose form is seen by a few, whose being is represented by angels- as with Abraham's visitors- then God will inevitably be given gender... gender being one of the normative attributes of all persons, with the rare exception of hermaphrodites who have both.

This, of course, suits patriarchal societies where men dominate. It is good to imagine that God has a hairy chest and a penis... then he's just like one of us, only bigger. His maleness (which is essentially a flag of convenience as regards language) will be invoked to buttress all that is dear to the dominant male establishment, be that on the battlefield, in the courts or in religion.

And what endorses and buttresses this perception of God is that in the dealings God has with humanity, the dominant group will be keener to record the activity of God in terms which accord with their obsessions and engagements than in terms which would favour the oppressed class or minority groups.

It is interesting, in this regard, that in the more cerebral books of the Old Testament... in the Pentateuch and in the History books, there is virtually no allusion to God in other than masculine terms.

God is the architect and builder of the universe,
God is the warrior going in front of people smashing the enemy,
God is the judge and lawgiver who recreates in the celestial equivalent of the Atheneum,
God is the monarch who reluctantly allows others to sample kingship.

It is not until we come to the psalms and the prophets and the Gospels, that this academically correct male deity has correctives made as regards the divine personality.

It is as if God were saying, "I'm fed up with the logical, left brain thinkers having their way. I'm fed up being male". So to the imagination of poets and prophets other pictures are given of God... as the nursing mother holding the weaned child
As the woman who is panting and groaning with the onset of childbirth

As the midwife who is not going to close the mouth of the womb when delivery is due.

And , Stunningly, when we hear God spoken of by Jesus, the models for God... as the models for discipleship are not bound to one gender.

Yes, God is like the Shepherd who hoists the lost lamb on his shoulders,
But God is also like the woman who throws a party when she finds her lost coin.

God- in the person of Jesus shows masculine rage in the face of the supercilious pharisaic cult,

- yet also in the person of Jesus, God weeps on being deeply moved by the tears of the grieving Mary, sister of Lazarus.

Now, it is almost an unwritten law of human society that clubs are formed by people who are like or aspire to be like the founding members. The Rifle Association in the USA does not have many pacifists on its books, not does the Mother's Union have a queue of beer-swilling bricklayers wanting to join.

If the dominant culture... in state or religion can convincingly argue or imply that their ultimate superior is male... it is only natural (in the neutral sense of that term) that those who belong to the clubs of which the ultimate superior is founder and honorary chair should be of the same gender as him.

So, for most of the Judaeo-Christian period, the synagogue and the church have been seen as the places of belonging primarily to those who most resembled- in terms of gender- the mysterious Godhead who was commonly spoken of in exclusively male terms.

But back to Eden.

For as well as being the source of complication regarding God being a person and therefore not to be neutered, Eden is also the place where we learn something which plays a remarkably minor role in terms of biblical witness.

It is Eden... or more especially in Chapter 1 of Genesis which precedes the Adam and Eve story that we learn that both male and female were made in the image of God.

Now, though we might think otherwise, that is virtually the only mention in the whole of Scripture which indicates that we resemble our creator. It is quite exceptional and is mentioned in that part of Genesis which is closest to poetry or than to verifiable history. Nowhere else in the whole Bible is the issue raised until in 2Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes that we are being constantly transformed into the image of Christ with increasing glory.

I find this interesting from a theological perspective. It is as if we have been created in the image of God, but that image is something which only gradually comes to fullness... particularly when we are closest to resembling Christ. It is like saying that someone is a born artist... genetically that is his or her endowment and disposition... but it is not until s/he begins to be introduced to canvas and paints and study with a master that this inherent givenness begins to appear.

Paul (usually some might say) sees this progression into the full image of God as something which is not gender specific, in the same way as Genesis indicates that our imaging after our maker implies that God is imaged in both male and female.

But, as we know.. it has taken Christendom a long time to discover the meaning of this solitary verse and, again, because the Bible has been predominantly interpreted by, and the church organized by men, there emerged the notion that while all were created equally in the image of God, 49% of humanity were a better photofit than the others.

And we, unwittingly have either bought into and perpetuated this or have been the victims of it. And I want to note some ways in which this has come about.

1) Old Testament biblical heroes to which children are introduced are invariably male whose strength or supposed strength is extolled:

Thus Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Samson, are seen as worthy men made in the image of God.

Two mistaken concomitants follow:

a) that they are paragons of virtue... so we don't ponder much on Noah exposing himself when naked, Abraham passing off his wife as his sister, David being a serial adulterer or Samson being a psychopath.

b) the more rounded male figure... like the prophets, or the more quirky males like Elisha are hardly given a mention in popular teaching.

2) Old Testament... and to some extent, New Testament women are invariably depicted as fallen or inadequate, in need of a good man to keep them in check.

The procession of fallen damsels begins with Eve and includes Hagar, Tamar, Rahab, the woman at the well, the adultress in Luke's Gospel and a host of others.

The corollary to this is that any women of virtue are normally portrayed as the most submissive and anaemic of creatures.

Sarah is a jolly old grannie, not the conniving old harridan she could be.

Ruth is a sorry victim of circumstances, not a risk-taker for the sake of the family tree.

The haemorrhaging woman is so placid that it's a wonder where she gets the strength to hijack a tightpacked crowd of male greybeards surrounding Jesus.

And when we come to the BVM (the Blessed Virgin Mary... for protestants) she is the eternally 16 year old dotting icon of anorexia even when her 33 year old son needs a ticking off for being oblivious to the shortage of alcohol at a wedding reception.

I remember discussing this phenomenon with women from the East End of Glasgow.

One of them, a very seasoned and tough woman said;

"I'll tell you why Mary is made out to be so timid:

Who is it who paints the Bible pictures?... Men

Who is it who makes the statues?... Men

Who is it who writes the hymns about her?... Men

There's a conspiracy going on.

They makes Mary look like she wouldn't say boo to a goose

And then expect their wives to be the same and not give them any trouble."

3) We have persuaded ourselves that the disciples of Jesus were predominantly male. Now, granted, the twelve who were the inner core were all men. But in the Gospels there are as many women who are clearly stated as being among his followers, but because several of them are named Mary we tend to forget their existence. (There was a shortage of female names in those days!)

For example, in Luke 8, the chapter begins with
With Jesus were the twelve and a number of women he had set free from evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, known as Magdala from whom seven demons had come out, Joanna, the wife of Chuiza, a steward of Herod's, Susanna and many other. These women provided for them out of their resources.

4) Our understanding of Jesus engagement with both sexes is overshadowed by our negative associations of women in the Old Testament and in the writings of Paul.

If you read from Genesis to Zechariah and then go to Romans, while it is not a seamless web, there is a consonance in male headship and the silencing or subjugating women. Protestants particularly tend to read Jesus through the eyes of Paul, but I am more and more convinced that Paul had no idea of how Jesus felt or how Jesus reacted to certain social realities, one of which was the presence of women.

It is therefore interesting to note that while Paul is afraid of young widows gossiping and rules that women should keep silent in church (though this is not all Paul says), Jesus is quite different.

If we look at what Jesus said to women, or about women, there is no occasion when Jesus gives a woman a dressing down or uses a particular woman to illustrate moral or spiritual laxity.

Instead he sees woman as models of faith, love, forgiveness and generosity
A woman, not a man is the first evangelist
Women, not men, announce the resurrection. (Why is it that male priests see reading the Gospel as their prerogative in some churches?)

5) I put responsibility for this unbalanced view of the equal imaging of male and female on male church leadership. And it has not all been done in innocence.

I was asked to preach at Evensong in Westminster Abbey. I asked for the lections for the day and discovered that the Old Testament reading for Mattins was the cry of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt to God. The evensong Old Testament reading was the call of Moses.

I noted that between these two was the story of five women; Moses' mother, sister, Pharaoh's daughter, and Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives who defied male authority in different ways in order that the child might live.

So when I came to preach I began by saying;

"Somewhere in the last five hours between Mattins and now, five female middle eastern conspirators have disappeared in the Abbey."

Later one kindly Anglican cleric admitted that if I looked through their lectionary, I would find very few stories which mentioned virtuous or defiant women.

My principal contention here is that the inclusion of males and exclusion of females as regards full participation in the community of faith is not something which has solid biblical foundations.

What we are dealing with is the exultation of male ecclesiology and a masculinist theology to the status of divine truth, replacing the essential mystery of Gender.

When I began, I spoke of three mysteries... God, Gender and Love.

And I believe that in our attempts to correct the misapprehensions and bogus theologies of previous years, we must appeal to the potential in us all for responding to and in the third mystery of love.

For within the Body of Christ we are enjoined to love each other by command of Christ. If you love other human beings, you cannot treat one gender as if its distinctiveness was an emblem of inferiority, nor can you make your love for persons of that gender conditional on them either remaining passive or adopting the jaded outlook of their antagonist.

And if you love God, then you must love all that God has created and blessed. And particularly as regards God's image residing in humanity equally in male and female, you cannot rewrite scripture to suggest that only one gender is endowed with the divine image... unless of course you have had a bite too many from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil like Adam... and Eve.

John Bell