

Lent 1 2019

'It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.'

These are the words Jesus uses to refuse the devil's temptation to step aside from the path of suffering onto the road of glory. Think how different things would have been had Jesus not done so. No ministry of healing, no betrayal, no passion, no cross, no resurrection breathing forgiveness. Just a triumphal march to Jerusalem, everyone waving palm branches and wearing 'Make Israel Great Again' hats. A whole religion based on the glorification of power rather than the glorification of love.

There is no part of my being that doesn't resound with joy and relief that this was not the path that Jesus took. And yet there is a part of me, the part that also resounds with Friday's International Women's Day, that continuously struggles with the words he uses, and that the church continues to use. Words so familiar to our ears that they seem an inevitable choice, uncontroversial, barely registering as exclusionary. Words we only really hear when they are replaced with the opposite because it grates so against our nerves and sensibilities: Worship the Lady your God, and serve only Her.

So I am beginning Lent in an uncomfortable place. A place where I'm asking you to come with me and risk the discomfort in the hope it might be a holy unsettling. Lent is a time for exploring wildernesses and looking at hard truths so - welcome to Lent!

In her just published book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* Caroline Criado Perez explores the ways that the world around us is designed with only male bodies in mind. From minor annoyances, like iPhones being designed for male hands and upper shelves being set too high for most women to reach, to life-threatening issues with crash test dummies being modeled on an average man and flak jackets failing to fit women police officers, the world around us is designed for men. That male is the norm is not some feminist theory it's a fact of everyday life.

Male is the norm in religion as well as in data and design. Not necessarily amid the membership but definitely in the leadership and most definitely in the language and imagery we use of God. In this service alone we use male language for God over 70 times – yes, I did count! – most often the word ‘Lord’ but a fair number of ‘Fathers’ and ‘Hes’ there too.

And some people’s reaction to this, maybe most people’s, will be ‘So what?’ This is the language used by the Bible and the BCP – both sacred texts for Episcopalians! Even more to the point this is the language used by our beloved Jesus, God incarnate. What else are we to use? We need to follow Jesus, to worship the God that he rejects Satan to follow, the God Jesus himself calls Father and Him.

Oh dear sweet goodness, yes, we need to worship the God of Jesus – the God Jesus taught and loved and was. The whole point of the season of Lent is to bring us closer to this very God so we can be caught up in the joy and glory of Christ’s resurrection. But we do this very God a disservice if we let the patriarchal aspect of our Christian roots constrict our current growth as God’s people.

Jesus lived as a man of first century Palestine as well as being God incarnate. He was a man of his time as well as of eternity. The language Jesus used was the patriarchal language of his culture and religion - even though in his life and actions he broke down social barriers to welcome, teach and learn from women. He did manage to sneak in a few references to God in female terms – as the woman who finds her lost coin as well as the shepherd who finds his lost sheep, as the mother hen who broods lovingly over Jerusalem.

Jesus also called on us to be open to the Spirit leading us into all truth. And one of those truths is the one known as feminism – the strikingly new recognition that women are of equal worth, value and ability as men. We’ve come a long way from the church in the 10th century that was still actively debating whether women had souls. We’ve even come a long way from the church of the 1960s when only men could represent Christ at the altar. But we still have a long way to go.

I know that some of you rejoice and some of you cringe when I use female language of God in the liturgy. I don't do this to shock, to show how right on I am, or to embrace change for the sake of change. I do this for two reasons. Firstly because it is the only way I know to be faithful to the God I experience as Creator, Beloved and Indwelling Spirit. It is the only way I know to be true to Jesus Christ as the one who reveals God as valuing and loving all people with indiscriminate passion. I cannot be your priest and not share the God I know as fierce mother as well as gentle father, as sister as well as brother, as indwelling all us women as much as all you men.

The second reason I do it is because it is a social justice issue for all human beings. When we refuse to see the sacred in women's bodies, whether cis or trans, we fail to truly value women's bodies. When we deny the feminine in divinity we deny the divinity in the female – as theologian Mary Daly said decades ago 'When God is male then male is God.' The #Metoo movement shows us where that leads, as do the attempts to put control of women's bodies in male hands. Our daughters deserve better of us than this, as do our sons. To the girls we give the gift of knowing they bear the image of God, from the boys we take the burden of believing that they alone bear the image of God.

Ok, there is a third reason I do this. It's because I am a woman. I'm a privileged woman – I'm white and educated and middle class, straight and cis gender. But I know what it's like to grow up and never hear my God spoken of as she or her. I know what it's like to never, ever see my body reflected in an image of the divine. I know what it's like to have been told, by women as well as men, that you might as well ordain a dog as ordain a woman. And let me tell you – it sucks! Language matters. It's not a triviality it's at the core of how we humans see ourselves and one another.

We live in a world where women continue to be the poorest of the poor. Where female fetuses continue to be aborted in far greater numbers than male fetuses. Where 12 year old girls are being forced to carry and give birth to their rapist's babies. This will not be miraculously put right if we start using female as well as - not instead of, as well as - male language for God. But it will never be put right if we don't. If we fail to value the female as greatly as the male in religion as well as in all other walks of life. Let's make sure at least part of our world is not exclusively designed for men!

What does it mean to worship the Lord your God and serve only him? It means to continue to do what Jesus did - to break down boundaries in the name of God's inclusive kingdom. To challenge those who seek to exclude any from the love of God. And to expand our language so that it includes us all in the circle of the divine. This Lent let us be open to the unsettling delight of the Spirit as she dances through each one of our bodies and finds in each of us an image of the most holy God.