

DO YOU HAVE TO BE A WOMAN?

St James King Street, Sydney, Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary 13 August 2017
Texts: Isaiah 61:10 -6 2:3; Psalm 113 OR Song of Mary (*APBA* 425); Galatians 4:4-7;
Luke 2:1-7

Do you have to be a woman to imagine what that journey Mary made with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem was like? The jarring potholed road? The threat of bandits? The donkey stumbling? Mary clutching her swollen belly, protecting her baby, afraid she'd fall? Do you have to be a woman to imagine what an awful time she had of it? Joseph's hometown relatives, if there were any, wouldn't put them up, and *there was no place for them in the inn*? Do you have to be a woman to imagine what Mary felt like with nowhere to shelter when her waters broke and her contractions started and she had no one to help her and Joseph was a man and men didn't involve themselves in such things as the blood and mess and gasping and panting and pain of a woman giving birth? Do you have to be a woman — to understand that?

Not quite. Not quite.

Birthing is the creating of new life through hard work ... God also brought new life, Gospel life to birth, stretched for hours on the Cross, autonomy removed by aggressive experts, the Eternal Word reduced to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark ...¹

God can imagine all that. God has given birth. It's not a new idea. I've just quoted from a piece from the 1980s but way back in the thirteenth century German theologian, philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhardt wrote about what we might call God's super-fecund² birthing creativity: "What does God do all day long?" Meister Eckhardt asked. "God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth."³

God and Mary both understand. God designed the system. Mary became God's partner in the birthing process of new life. Weighed down by the Word of God she'd made that difficult journey with Joseph and in a mucky Bethlehem stable the weight of the Word of God was born and *the Word became flesh [to dwell] among us ... full of grace and truth*.⁴

¹ Sara Maitland, 'Ways of Relating', Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology. A Reader*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990, pp.148-157. Previously published in *The Way*, 26 February, 1986, pp.124-133

² NERD NOTE: This adjective based on a sentence in S.J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken*, The Catholic University of American Press, Washington D.C., 2006, p.129. 'The divine is life in the absolute sense, infinite fecundity, overflowing and spilling forth ... Eckhardt expresses the super-fecundity of the divine with the metaphor of the maternity of God ...' As expressed in the quotation above.

³ Helen Bergin *et al*, "Sexism Ancient and Modern: Turning the Male World Upside Down", *Pacifica* 3 (1990), No.2, p.169.

⁴ John 1: 14 selectively

What happened in those seven hundred odd years between Eckhardt's words about a fecund maternal God and Sara Maitland's 'Eternal Word reduced to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark'? How did we manage, we human beings, to become less than fecund with our words and images about God? Our God who said, "*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness*", and in the image of God humankind was created male and female and God blessed them and said *it was very good*[!]⁵

It isn't as if there haven't been female images used for God. In the Bible the prophet Isaiah has *the Lord [going] forth like a soldier, like a warrior ... [stirring] up his fury*; but in the next breath has *the Lord is [crying] out like a woman in labour, gasping and panting*.⁶ And Jesus himself wove a feminine note into his words as when he talked about wanting to gather the people of Jerusalem like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings.⁷

Early Christians were quick to use feminine imagery and make a clever eucharistic link — breast milk with Jesus' shed blood. Second century Clement of Alexandria, for example, talked about breast feeding. He did acknowledge that the idea was a bit startling — perhaps it still is — but wrote anyway — blithely mixed his metaphors — that Christians should trust 'the "care-banishing breast" of God the Father whence comes our nourishment, 'the milk of love flowing from the Father by which alone we little ones are fed.'⁸ A couple of hundred years later we have Augustine of Hippo writing about the Christ in his *Confessions*: "what am I but a child suckled on your milk and fed on you, the food that perishes not?"⁹

And in more recent times? It took a woman, 20th C theologian Dorothy Sayers, to point out that Jesus never said one word to suggest there was anything odd or funny or inferior about women.¹⁰

Which hasn't prevented much of the power of the feminine from being bled from our language about God. Images of the feminine sidelined except in presentations of Mary as virginal, pure, perfect, demure and silent rather than moaning and panting to bring the weight of the Word of God into the world. But those ancient theologians couldn't ignore the fact that women — like men — are not perfect and pure. So they gave us the image of Eve, blamed for all human tendency to err and choose wrong over right and be plain downright nasty. They gave us the image of Mary Magdalene. Called whore, poor soul, though not a word of scripture backs that tradition up. They needed those

⁵ Genesis 1: 26,2 27 & 31 adapted.

⁶ Isaiah 42:13-14 Isaiah uses feminine imagery numbers of times; for example, God comforts as a mother comforts her child (Isaiah 66:13), for a mother can never forget the baby at her breast or compassion for the child she has borne (Isaiah 49:15).

⁷ Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34

⁸ Clement of Alexandria (c.150 - c.215) *Paedagogus*, The Instructor, Book I, Chapter iv.

⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book IV.1.

¹⁰ Dorothy Sayers, essay 'The Human-not-quite-Human' published in *Unpopular Opinions*, 1946, pp.121-122. NERD NOTE: This essay may be earlier than the book. It could be linked with an address 'Are Women Human?', also published in *Unpopular Opinions*, and delivered to a Women's Society in 1938.

other figures — Eve and Mary Magdalene — unlike their created Virgin Mary to represent un-pure womankind. In other words, normal women. Which is you and me, sisters.

Mary and her biblical sisters Eve and Mary Magdalene; all three either unattainable or undesirable role models for women. Do you have to be a woman to feel the impact? “Language is sneaky,” says Maitland, “If the image is a strong one it always demonstrates a tendency to ‘drift’ into reality”.¹¹ But the language of the feminine has been weakened, devalued. It became a washed out barely visible smear on the pages of Christian theological tomes. Do you have to be a woman to want to weep over that? The impact’s compounded when we remember that the church’s early teaching was informed by scientific views that we know now were just wrong. Male sperm, it was thought, contain the complete and perfect living child and the woman’s body provided nothing but a growing place for it. Theological great Thomas Aquinas taught that.

So male language and imagery soared into dominance and became the norm. And the feminine? The feminine, its autonomy removed by aggressive experts, was reduced, like the Eternal Word, to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark. The feminine drifted, not into reality, but into the shadowy edges of human discourse. Do you have to be a woman to want to cry out that we are created in God’s image and likeness too? Well, yes, maybe you do!

But ... do you have to be a woman to sense how this ancient inheritance can still damage lives, society, the common good now? No, you do not! We men and women created in the image and likeness of God can all cry out in protest, saying our ancestors in the faith loved God. So do we. But our times are not their times and our ways need not be their ways and our language need not be their language. We must be fecund for our own time, giving birth to new ways of speaking and being church and community and leaving behind that which serves God’s purposes for this world no more.

Leave behind thinking long gone but still powerful enough to imprison Mary as a kind of submissive obedient Barbie Doll who is no role model for today’s women. Oh, the lovely figures of Mary given us by painters and sculptors can still be loved. She has always brought comfort to troubled souls but that Mary is not the wonderful figure of subversive justice, beloved of the poor from very early centuries, the strong confronting Mary of the powerful celebratory song Luke gave her to sing. We need to reclaim that other Mary, the one who is not controlled or confined to static forms of marble and paint. Or made to submit to others’ ideas of what women should be.

We need that other gutsy Mary so women can be simply women, not lesser beings doomed as “not-men”. And what about the common good? Our society is gripped by the scourge of domestic violence that sees horrifying numbers of women cruelly beaten and murdered.¹² It is claimed that ‘partner damage’ is the greatest threat to women these days! There is currently renewed outcry and shock and horror being expressed with calls for an apology to women who are victims of this terrible crime. Apology will probably be made, which is no bad thing, but is that enough? Do you

¹¹ Sara Maitland, ‘Ways of Relating’, Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology. A Reader*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990, pp.148-157. Previously published in *The Way*, 26 February, 1986, pp.124-133 p.151

¹² NERD NOTE: It should be remembered that not all victims of domestic violence are women but the vast majority are. This is a distinction that needs to be made in an academic report which is an entirely different genre from a sermon.

have to be a woman to suspect that the words, though well-meant, will fade into wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark where the purposes of God will not be served and there will be silence as more women are sacrificed in the dark?

And what about our Church? Are there wordless cries among us? We could do worse than think seriously of the tragedy of some misunderstood words in our liturgy: “we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice”. We will not use these words today but the other post-communion response which is printed in your pew sheet. We will not use them because they do not mean that women who are beaten must accept that as their sacrifice in imitation of Jesus’ sacrifice. That is a tragic distortion which has been believed by some women — including Anglican women — and which forgets that Jesus’ sacrifice brought hope-filled life, not death or hope-less destruction of life. Are our words adding — even if in only one life — to confusion and destruction rather than new life? Are we deaf to those wordless cries those poor beaten women, bleeding down into the dark?¹³

Most loving God, you send us into the world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage in the power of your spirit, to be as Mary, confronting, strong, beautiful and bold, bearing the weight of the Word of God to the world; this we pray through Christ, our only mediator and advocate. Amen

(The Rev’d) Elaine Farmer, Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 13 August 2017

¹³ NERD NOTE: do we need to borrow Archbishop Romero’s famous injunction and say: ”I command you, in the name of God, stop using religion to justify domestic violence”? Given that many people, clergy and lay, are aware of the problem, and fighting hard to wipe out domestic violence, that may not be a fair question. All the same, it would be an arresting way to focus the Church’s attention.