

Justice and inclusion -A daughter of Abraham

Cork Scripture Group, 2nd Nov. 2020, Lorna Downey

One of the first things we are told when we approach the study of Scripture, of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament writings, is to note that it was written originally for and to its own time and place. We recognise that scripture had things to say to certain people in a certain place long ago. It does not take long for us to recognise too that the great truths of Scripture transcend time and place and hold a relevance for us today, many generations removed from the original authors. These writings have something to teach us in the 21st century, as much as they did Jews returning to their homeland following the exile in Babylon or to tiny Christian communities spread throughout Greece and Asia Minor in the first century CE. These writings preserved so carefully across the ages help us to interpret the relationship between the One God and humanity, and inform our behaviour in relating to one another, to this day. The many writers of scripture present us with an understanding of God and humanity which develops over time as the People of God move from being nomadic Bronze Age herders, to having a homeland and a culture and faith unique among their neighbours, to being a hard-pressed Roman province at the time of Jesus, and beyond to the missionary Church post Resurrection and Pentecost. The writers of scripture were people of their time and place but more often than they are perhaps given credit for they point us to God's radical inclusivity. If God is for us, who can be against us (Rom8:31).

Before going any further, it would be good to get clarity on some terminology:

Justice in scripture is not really a legalistic term like we may understand it today. In the Bible *Justice* means "to make right". If people live in right relationship with God and one another and indeed with all creation, then Justice reigns. Justice springs from love of God and honouring God's will for his people so that all may thrive in peace. "In his days justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails" (Ps71).

Include to comprise or contain as part of a whole.

Inclusion the act or state of being included within a group or a structure.

We develop inclusion in a society, workplace or organisation by having policies and practices in place to provide access to or opportunities to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised for being in a minority group. (for example- due to age, gender, race /ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexuality, mental or physical challenges).

Diversity in an organisation reflects the variety of the society in which it operates. A lack of diversity can cause unconscious and subconscious bias against those who are under-represented, or indeed unrepresented.

The women's movement has seen women progress through generations of protest and advocacy in the century since women first achieved the right to vote and have a say in the society they wished to see develop. Yet there is still a gender pay gap for the same work as a male colleague, the "me too movement" reminded us of gender based harassment and exploitation in Hollywood which has lifted the lid on the problem in society at large. We celebrate the fact that female astronauts and scientists could work in the international space station alongside men but lament the fact that

nobody thought to supply ISS with suits appropriate to the female form, so they too could go on a spacewalk!

A feminist friend recently suggested to me that women were held back in western society because our society is informed by centuries of Christian theology that placed women in subservient roles. Perhaps she is right. Since Vatican II, however, we have seen the study of theology open more to women and have seen them bring their unique female perspective and lived experience into the academic forum. Women, both lay and religious, have been speaking truth to power passionately and resolutely, I assured my friend. She seemed unconvinced that it was getting us anywhere. My desire to grip this thorny branch came from the need to see if scripture really supported a theology that would keep one half of humanity in a limited state.

I didn't know what answers I would find but was hopeful and full of questions prompted by that conversation. I would ask you to sit with my questions and your own should they arise.

Here are some questions to think about as we move forward.

Does religion aid/ impede the progress of women around the world? How? Why?

How can women participate fully in a patriarchal structure?

Does our Church reflect the changing roles of women in society?

I was introduced to scripture in Confirmation preparation aged 12 with 2 little books *Good News by Matthew* and *Good News by Luke*. I can still see the simple line drawing illustrations in my mind's eye. That introduction to the parables and miracles of Jesus set me on a lifetime journey with scripture. I know now that I am called and known and a temple of the Spirit. The pool I dipped my feet in as a girl is a lake to float in now. Nothing that I have read makes me feel 'less than'. Why is that?

Our images of God and the language we use to describe God can be seen to be masculine and patriarchal, this is true; God is Father, Jesus is Son. God is described as judge and king. But if we look in scripture God is described in female terms too eg Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 20:21-22; as Mother in Isaiah 49:15 and Isaiah 66:12-13. In Jerh18:6 God is the Potter. Elsewhere God is also mentioned in non- gender terms such as Creator, Saviour, Helper. God is spoken of using animal imagery eg Lion, Eagle and even in inanimate objects such as rock, wind, fire, fountain of water, shield. What all this surely shows us is that God is too big, too ineffable to be held in any one image, but these images used in scripture show us something of God within the limitations of our human understanding and using the language at our disposal.

Our language falls short and can even confuse at times. If we go to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it says that "In no way is God in man's image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the difference between the sexes..." (CCC370). If God is neither man nor woman and is pure spirit, then how is God "He"? Elohim is a plural word and we Christians worship a Holy Trinity, a mystical unity, so if God needs a pronoun to describe God why is it not "They"? It is true to say though, that if I am made in the image and likeness of God who knew me before I came to be, then I in my mortal gendered humanity reflect something of the image of the genderless eternal God who brought all things into being.

We know that Jesus modelled God to us by living the best human life for us to follow. Paul asked us to imitate him because he imitated Christ (1Cor11:1; Phil3:17). My struggle to reflect the image of Christ in the world is no different to that of my brothers in faith. "If you belong to Christ then you are

Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise "(Gal3:29). It is worth pondering how I am to model Jesus in the world if the gendered language of my faith excludes me, if those like me are left unmentioned or between two asterisks to be read as an option at Sunday Mass. I will take comfort in the words of St Teresa of Avilla who reminds me that "Christ has no hands now but yours..." Women have always seen the way and found a way.

Perhaps our language of faith abounds with masculine nouns and pronouns because Jesus revealed God to us as Father. Father, yes, but not the paterfamilias of the Roman household with power over the life and death of every family member, nor the strict legalistic patriarch of the Hebrew understanding. Jesus called God 'Abba' a familiar name, 'Dad' if you will. It is a deeply personal and relational image. This is the father who sits you on his knee, who picks you up and dusts you off when you fall, who hears you cry in the dark and comforts you. This is the parental God, the mother who holds her infant to the breast, who nourishes and protects with a fierce love. God is parent, mother, father, both. Jesus taught us that with the word 'Abba'. God is close, personal and God cares. Jesus revealed a God of paternity not patriarchy. If God is parent then we are children, sons and daughters, as Paul writes to the Romans – "if we are children, then we are heirs- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his Glory(Rom8:17). If God allows me to share in the glory of Christ, then who should prevent me achieving as much as any other son or daughter of God here and now?

Women are mentioned at important moments in the gospels, often they remain un-named but their inclusion is the lesson. Jesus' understanding of relationship with God was such that he treated everyone equally. He did not model the patriarchal system he grew up in. He practised a radical inclusion. He welcomed outcasts, foreigners, gentiles, sinners. He touched the ritually unclean. He healed people body, mind and spirit. Jesus restored their dignity as human beings and modelled God's justice. The women that are seen and named and included in the gospels are a marvel in their own time; only the wives of rabbis could be educated and yet Jesus let Mary of Bethany sit at his feet to learn, when women could not speak in public much less travel round the countryside as they pleased, many women were among Jesus' closest disciples; they are with him from the beginning of his ministry to the crucifixion. The testimony of women in court was not allowed yet the first messengers of the Resurrection were women. It is clear too from Paul's epistles that women held positions of respect and responsibility in the early church communities. This was a novel situation compared to the world outside their own communities. It is little wonder that it did not hold, and that wider societal norms came to once again hold sway, the further they moved from Pentecost. Yet the fact remains that it was the reality in those early church communities. Nothing so extraordinary would have been documented were it not true. What is the truth for our times in the inclusion of these women's names and stories in our faith's foundational documents? Could what was once come to be again?

'If she can see it, she can be it'. The actress and producer Geena Davis campaigns to address gender imbalance in the movie industry. She laments the lack of strong female roles, women whose stories are told on their own merit and not as the romantic sidepiece or the victim needing rescuing by the male lead in the movie. She wants to see more women represented as screenwriters and producers in order to see these stories told, as directors and at every process from recording to editing, to ensure the female perspective will permeate more movies and satisfy the female viewer. Seeing women in action roles and as non-traditional female roles will send a message to our daughters she believes, that will remove subliminal limits and expectations placed on them.

'If she can't see it, she can't be it', interestingly this is the mission statement of the 20x20 (20 by 20) campaign presented by the Federation of Irish Sport. They want to create a shift in the perception of women and girls in sport. They identified 3 targets to reach by the end of 2020 – 20% more media coverage of women in sport, 20% more female participation at player, coach, referee and

administrative level and 20% more attendance at women's games and events. Each of the above campaigns arose because women are doing exactly what their male counterparts are doing but are somehow misrepresented or undervalued. How are women represented and imaged in our Church? Who speaks for women? Is anyone listening?

There are many questions and perhaps no clear answers, but there is much room for discussion and dialogue going forward. Before we look more closely at some passages of scripture, I will share this quote from Elizabeth Johnson and give the last word to St. Paul.

"In the light of the original gospel story...it becomes clear that the heart of the problem is not that Jesus was a man but that more men are not like Jesus; insofar as patriarchy defines their self-identity and relationships. Reading scripture through feminist hermeneutics makes it possible to affirm that despite subsequent distortion something more than the subordination of women is possible for Jesus." [Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, (New York Crossroads Publishing, 1994), 24.]

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal3:28)...

And because you are children, God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal4:6-7) NRSV.