

12th Sunday in the Year C

Galatians 3:26-29

Like many in Oxford, I have spent the last couple of weeks marking examinations. Having set the paper in modern Christian theology, I have no right to complain that the questions were not always as interesting as they might have been. But it's true. The problem for the examiner, of course, is the frequency of what we call the stock answer. This is the essay which the student has memorised in advance, and is determined to fit to any specified question within the subject area. Popular among theology students is what we call feminist theology, a not altogether helpful term, since almost all Christian theology is conscious of its own perspective, and very little worthwhile theology is limited to only one such perspective. Since feminist theology has been on my mind, and I have encountered frequently references to this morning's epistle reading, because the so-called proof text of Christian feminism is Galatians chapter 3 verse 28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

There was doubtless a time when the parish priest of St Mary Magdalen's Oxford was as likely to preach about feminist theology as the English public is likely to be realistic in assessing the ability of its football team. But churches like this one have always been mixed communities and, in my experience, it's often the life of the community

from within which allows thoughts to change and develop. The same is true of the theological community. One of the great contributions of feminist theologians has been in the literary archaeology of early Christian texts, which points to some quite remarkable features of the early church where the place of women is concerned. No member of this church should be in any doubt that among the most important of all early Christians is the woman to whom God first entrusted the good news of Jesus' resurrection – Mary Magdalen. The flabby attempts of the Christian tradition to identify Mary of Magdalen with the woman who was a sinner who anointed Jesus feet, whom we met last week, distract us from the shocking reality that is despite Jesus saying that wherever the gospel is preached that story will be told in memory of her, we in fact have no idea who she was.

Feminist readings of Scripture ought not make us into feminists per se, so much as put us back in touch with the strange new world of the Bible, a world in which ancient Israel is ruled by a woman, Deborah; in which the efforts of armies of men pale into insignificance by comparison with the ministry of Rahab the prostitute and Jael the seductress. Of course Israel is far from unique in ancient culture for preserving the essential memory of female heroism, but it is a memory which Christianity has not always kept so well.

A couple of obvious examples will show what I mean. Ancient Greek is a gendered language, every noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter. If I'm speaking of an early Christian minister, I might refer to a "diakonos", a deacon who is a man, or a "diakones", a deacon who is a woman. The New Testament gives examples of both. However in our modern English translations, we are inclined to call the man a deacon, but the woman a deaconess. Why does this matter? Simply because deacon is one of the threefold orders of the church and deaconess is not. Scripture does not legitimate our distinguishing between men and women in this role, but the assumption of the church has been to project back into the first century the structures which later emerged. Or let us take, since we are here, our own St Mary Magdalen. As I said, few Christians are more important. But the Catholic church makes the feast day of St Mary Magdalen only a third class affair, what we call a memorial, less significant than a solemnity - class one - or a feast - class two. Why does this matter? Well many far less significant Saints seemed to be ranked more highly than Mary Magdalene according to this classification. All of Jesus' male companions are given at least feasts, class two. St Laurence, an undoubtedly important third century martyr, is given a feast, but Mary Magdalen, companion of the Lord, first witness to the resurrection, apostle to the apostles, ranks lower down.

These sorts of anomalies have been used in recent years to deepen our appreciation of the startling breadth of the Christian community in its earliest forms. But they should also be used to remind us that it is of the essence of Christianity to shock and challenge our preconceived assumptions. It would be nice for me to tell you that St Paul was a feminist. He was not. In Christ, there are no distinctions. All human beings baptised into Christ are united into the one person of the son of God. But this does not mean, for Paul, that all other things are equal. However we must also consider that consistently edgy and undermining witness of Scripture, which places women where men think they ought not to be, and which chips away at the comfortable male security that thinks that because men are in control on earth, then God himself must be a man.

But there is something to be said about this particular passage as well. Remember that Galatians is written in controversial circumstances. Paul is in dispute with those who insist that Gentile Christians must be made subject to the full physical requirements of the ritual law, and hence must be circumcised before they can be brought into the kingdom of those redeemed by Christ. For Paul, such an insistence denies the freedom to which we are called, because it creates a physical barrier between Christ and the nations. The law remains the gift of God – our guardian through infancy and education, as he puts it – but now that the law has come to its completion, its fruition in Christ, the

physical demands which mark out God's chosen people have also come to an end. To subject the Gentile Christians to circumcision would be to subject them to the whole law, but to do so would be to suggest that Christ had lived and died to no purpose, but because Christ has lived and died, and because all are baptised into that death and resurrection, there is now no distinction, there is only Christ himself.

What Paul is proposing, is nothing less than a new understanding of religious identity. Nothing less radical could be faithful to the gospel. The gift of the spirit, in preserving and providing the extraordinary story of the extraordinary women who make the Bible and Christian tradition what it is, is a gift with which we in our generation are abundantly blessed. Like all gifts, it comes with responsibility, and the responsibility to acknowledge the church's failings in this regard is one not to be shirked. It is Mary Magdalene herself who provides our model of redemption. Healed by Christ, faithful to his call, loyal when the men who surrounded him and turned tail and fled, courageous in following to the foot of the cross, trusting and loving in her devotion to Jesus in life and in death. And, by the grace of God, entrusted with the greatest message ever given a human being. "He is not here. He is risen: Go and tell his disciples."