

GOD, WOMEN AND MEN

Language and Imagery

The Sheffield consultation in 1981 gathered people from all over the world to explore how women and men together share God's call to Christian life and witness. In the papers prepared, in the reports given and in the follow-up study since, many issues have been (and continue to be) discussed. Among them is the question of language and imagery used when talking about God and the people of God.

Only a generation ago, it was commonplace to use the word 'men' as an inclusive word, automatically meaning 'men and women'. It is rarely, however, used this way today outside the churches. Politicians no longer talk about men's votes if they are referring to both women and men. If we mention a Scotsman or an Englishman we mean just that, and we have to change the word if we mean a woman. But the churches have been slow to change. Sometimes too, when change has been asked for, it has not only been seen as unnecessary but has also been seen as a source of ridicule.

However, to many people it seems right to refuse to cling on to what is becoming an antique usage and to take a look at the whole question rather than making piecemeal, *ad hoc* changes. There are various areas which need looking at. One is prayer and worship. Churches which have set liturgies are gradually revising them, and many people regret that the Church of England agreed its new Alternative Service Book just before the period when this issue had become a conscious one within the churches. Churches which do not have set forms rely much more on the consciousness of those responsible for public prayer and worship. There needs to be the same kind of thought given by those leading worship as there has been concerning the use of Thou or You, otherwise the results can be rather distracting for the participants.

The language of hymns is more tricky. Where masculine pronouns or nouns can be changed without infelicity, it surely does not hurt to change, especially when looking at the preparation of a new Baptist hymn book. A natural instinct to conserve the past must be weighed against the effect on women who, once aware of this, or more importantly, coming into the Christian faith from right outside, may otherwise feel excluded, for there is something about evangelism here as well as worship. Some hymns cannot easily be altered, but if they are good hymns it may be right to keep them as they are with 'sexist language' alongside other out-of-date expressions, recognising the whole as part of the treasury of Christian devotion of the centuries. Some hymns, however, may not actually be helpful to new generations of Christians and we have to recognise that we must look to the future as well as to the past.

The language even of administration is part of the whole. When church secretaries or ministers receive communications from Baptist Church House it is true that the whole people of God are described as just that - people - rather than men. Ministers, however, are not always such an inclusive group; sometimes they are 'men', and if their activities are described, it is in terms of what 'he' does. It is true that today there is a lot of goodwill on this subject and that it

happens much less than it used to, but the fact that it happens at all (or that the colleges can still talk about men instead of students) means that there is a need to take the understanding more completely into our systems.

It is important in this context to note that although in the New Testament there are apparently many references to 'men' as the people of God, most of these do not have that implication in Greek, which has two words for man and men, the one meaning the opposite of woman, and the other meaning human being, as we acknowledge in the word 'anthropological'. It is this second word that is so often used when our translations can only give us 'men'. It is therefore clear that, for instance, the feeding of the five thousand was five thousand men (John 6.10), but that the 'true light that enlightens every man' enlightens every human being (John 1.9). This may seem like splitting hairs, but it is important in a period where language is changing in this respect to be clear what the New Testament says, so that the question of the inclusion of women in the Christian community is not inadvertently misunderstood. It is also to be noticed that where the translation says 'he' the Greek verb may not have a pronoun indicating he or she and unfortunately the most obvious way of putting it is too colloquial - the word 'they': 'whoever' might be better.

Many people today will understand and will try to come to terms with what is in fact a change in the use of language. What is more difficult and controversial is talk about the language used for God. This is understandable; from Israelite dealings with the Canaanites onwards there has always been a firm stand against anything resembling a fertility goddess being mixed up with Yahweh, who after all revealed himself in a man, Jesus Christ.

And yet ... and yet. Surely our God transcends both male and female; and as we are created male and female in his image we must all be born to mirror him. We have to use a personal pronoun to speak of God for he is a personal God, and traditionally 'she' seems to sound impossibly pagan. Yet our relationship with God is not just with a male figure but with one who is somehow both - and more than both - male and female. (To overemphasise 'he' can come near to the temptation of making graven images).

It is helpful to look, even briefly, at some of the descriptions of God in the Bible which in fact give an impression that is not always as male as the word 'he' seems to indicate. For example, alongside the King, the Lord strong and mighty in battle of the psalms (Ps.24.8), we also have the one who 'shelters us under the shadow of his wings' (Ps.17.8; 36.7; 57.7; 61.4), and 'the ever present help in trouble' (Ps.46.1). Here the word help is the same as that used of woman as a helper for man and has the overtones not of a soothing companion but of one who holds the family together.

Some feminists feel that the Christian God with whom they are presented is portrayed as so impossibly male-only that they cannot at all identify with him. This is perhaps partly because not enough attention has been drawn to the 'both-and' character of God. It is true that sometimes there is more effort needed to do the quarrying necessary to find it, but it is not something contrived by modern liberals but something integral to the Biblical witness.

We can continue those references to the psalms into the New Testament. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem contains both elements: he is hailed as the King who comes in the name of the Lord with the shouts of 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (Matthew 21.9); yet when he drew near to the city and saw it he wept over it and at some point during those tumultuous days he took up that other divine image and said 'How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not' (Matthew 23.37). God the Creator may be instinctively thought of as parallel to God the Father and in one sense is; yet it is worth noting that John's gospel records Jesus in that same week comparing his passion to that of a woman in childbirth (John 16.21-22). It was perhaps this combination of references which gave rise to the prayer of St Anselm many centuries later:

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wings? ... It is by your death that they have been born, for if you had not been in labour, you could not have borne death; if you had not died, you would not have brought forth ... you tasted of death, by dying you begot them. (from *Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, Penguin 1973)

These images put the biological functions of women boldly at the heart of the sacrifice of Christ. Beyond that we should not fall into the trap of stereotyping what is 'feminine' so that we automatically put tenderness on one side and toughness on the other, even though it is right to say that God embraces both, and that God in Christ is revealed as both Victim and Lord. Moreover, the two sacraments of the church relate to washing and feeding, those things which have been traditionally women's work.

Images of the Holy Spirit are also instructive. Many people hold that in languages where each noun has a gender this does not necessarily affect the way the noun is experienced. This may be true, but it may conversely be true that through the centuries the Latin masculine noun for Spirit has supplanted the Greek neuter and the Hebrew feminine. What is more obvious, however, is that beside the picture of wind and fire we have the picture of a dove. There is, too, a strong connection between the female figure of Wisdom in the Bible (Wis.7.22-27) and the work of the Spirit (especially in creation) - which links in with the work of Christ who is called the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Cor.1.24).

In order to be aware of the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ and not to confine him to a superman (even though we may still use the pronoun he) we need also to dwell on all the other Biblical images which come alongside those with an apparently masculine or feminine connotation. 'The Word became flesh', 'behold the Lamb of God' (John 1.14 and 29) are examples which can take us into a list including cornerstone, light, way, bread, vine, resurrection and life, pictures which are vital as well as evocative, which point to the need to see the ascended Christ in terms that transcend the language of he and she as well as limitations of time and space.

These reflections are offered as part of the whole issue of men and women sharing God's call to Christian life and witness. To some they will seem very much a side-issue; others will feel that they do

not go far enough. Our relationships with each other and with God do, however, need language in which to be expressed and it seems to me important that we take as much care as possible to use language in a way that will all the time continue to deepen our faith, enable us better to share it with others, and help us to build each other up in Christian partnership.

Some books for reference

Betty Thompson, *A chance to change' Women and Men in the Church*, (based on the Sheffield Consultation 1981), The Risk Series of the W.C.C.

Sara Maitland, *A map of the new country' Women and Christianity*, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Pauline Webb, *Where are the Women?* Epworth, 1979.

RUTH MATTHEWS

The Revd Ruth Matthews, M.A. is a Baptist minister in pastoral charge in Hemel Hempstead.

o - o - - o - o

ORDAINED AND FEMALE

Returning from speaking about ministry in the inner city in a church some distance from home, I realized that nobody had commented during the main sessions on the fact that I was a woman. Only in personal conversation in the church porch did a few people feel obliged to express interest or surprise in the fact that I am both ordained and female. That is quite good - as these things go. I still sometimes dream of the day when everybody to whom I minister will be more interested in the quality of my ministry than in my gender - though, on second thoughts I shall qualify that! I want people to notice that I am female - of course I do. But not to let that prejudice their assessment or acceptance of my work. Objectivity, that is what I long for. In my early days as a minister, I thought I might see such an objective approach in my time. Now, I know I shall not; never on a scale that is really widespread and never, in my lifetime, in the church.'

Remember Martin Luther King? 'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character'.

My present church is in inner London (Islington); it is multi-racial and multi-cultural, and for this I thank God. I should like to say that my experience of discrimination has opened my eyes to the deep-set and continuing hurt that some members of my church family have suffered. But the truth is the other way around.

I discovered an important truth early in my ministry here: that confidence, far from being a sin, is essential to growth. For some of us, personal confidence is well-nigh impossible to achieve, for we are so diminished by others. It happens not only in the way they treat us, but more subtly and effectively in the low level of the expectations they have of us. Their surprise, when we do something well, betrays them. I believe passionately in the need for personal confidence, and I