

Keble Mass

13 June 2012

Sermon preached by Kay Goldsworthy

St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne

In the name of God; Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. Amen.

In 1863, thirty years after preaching the Assize sermon, John Keble preached on the feast of Mary Magdalene. He entitled his sermon, 'Women labouring in the Lord.' Reading it, it becomes abundantly clear that John Keble and his friends of the Oxford movement brought a fresh and deep scholarship which allowed light to shine into some fairly secluded corners.

Beginning, as might be expected with "God sent forth his son, made of a woman" the sermon continues, "...it is observable how it is from time to time women were selected to be His agents or occasions for new steps to be taken, new doors, as it were to be opened, in the progress and diffusion of his marvellous mercy."

And so they are named.

The woman of Samaria drawn to the well at mid-day, meeting Jesus, described as "His first messenger to that remarkable people."

The haemorrhaging woman, and "the privilege of being the first to have revealed to her the healing (might I not say sacramental?) Virtue which abode in the very hem of his garment to meet the touch of Faith."

The Women you and I would name as disciples, described as "the first who had the honour of ministering to Jesus of their substance."

The company of women who were with Jesus, "From Galilee to Jerusalem, at Bethany, on the way to Calvary, around his Cross, before his death, beside his grave, both before and after his resurrection."

And of course, Magdalene, "an Evangelist commissioned to announce the gospel of the resurrection to the Apostles themselves."

In the midst of this sermon there's a call to a new sense of vocation for women – a call which comes to light as the unknown woman of Mark 14 anoints Jesus with costly perfume. "She has done what she could" Jesus tells the critics. Keble describes her action as sacrificial – her sacrifice – and then imagined what might be possible if 19th Century women did what they could for Christ's little ones. And the sisterhoods and societies which are well known began.

Movements are moments in time, gathering people and drawing them together – they are energetic, often untidy, lively. The experts tell us that it's possible that, after the first wave of energy passes the desire to hold on to what was is strong. Then we often find a way to make a monument to stand for this great moment. We try to hold on to the first flush of enthusiasm. Monuments don't have the fluidity, the energy terrifying or wonderful, that sense of the power of the new – they become instead simply reminders of what was.

So, in this 20th anniversary year as many celebrate the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican Church in Australia I've come to the Keble Mass with some questions – questions but no easy answers.

Has the Oxford movement and Catholic revival which, without me ever knowing, had given shape and texture to the way in which my understanding of the church, of her ministry, of the vitality of its liturgical and sacramental life was formed, been able to look forward in this century and live on as women have taken our place beside men, not only in religious communities, or societies but in the ordained ministry of the church? Is this movement to blame for hundreds of other women in this country who have heard, in the ritual of a Maundy Thursday service or as they've held out their hands to receive the real presence of Christ in bread and wine, or in some other catholic expression of faith, God whispering to them of offering and ordained ministry?

Is it responsible for allowing the apostolic succession of that ministry shared in femaleness and maleness? Or at the altar in persona Christi, "take, eat, this is my body" at one and the same time one of the most intimate and one of the most public of actions? Or in the way the baby is held over the water of the font- differently perhaps and yet as securely as ever? Or maybe in the moment of anointing and prayer when healing grace is sought for that which is killing? In pronouncing God's blessing in the community of the ecclesia or the community of two? Or in the in the responsibility of announcing forgiveness in the absolute assurance that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, that God's mercies ever come to an end?

Perhaps we can dare to answer yes – as we celebrate 20 years of the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican Church of Australia. Perhaps we can say yes because we 20th and 21st century Anglicans, whose spirituality and practice has been influenced by the Oxford movement lived out here and around the world, have dared to believe that rather than just looking back we could allow an open space in this day and our time in which to discover new ways of being faithful in Christ.

In this anniversary year, and at this Keble Mass, it seems to me that the questions with which we struggle aren't so much about how we work together as women and men in ministry lay and ordained – but about how we continue to live into the energy of that movement which touches hearts and minds still, for good and for God? How we fulfil the ministry to which we have been called today?

How do we exercise a real and meaningful ministry to those we used to know but now are largely served by our caring agencies? How do we discern the difference between charity and justice and act accordingly in ministry? How do we re-enter the schools of which we like to boast, but which often don't seem to need us anymore? How do we respond to the needs of remote and rural communities outside the comfort of the urban sprawl? How do we maintain the energy to read, to pray, to go on in the midst of communities who no longer know what we stand for? How do we become the blessing of the 'pure in heart' about whom Jesus taught his first followers? How do we sift through the many dangerous strands of theological prejudice which always seem to come so neatly packaged for a quick ministry or mission fix?

Last year at a conference hosted by Archbishop Rowan Williams, 'Transformations – Theology and Experience of Women's Ministry', Cambridge Professor, The Reverend Dr Sarah Coakely, spoke on what she called 'The Open Sore of Incoherence.'

Speaking of ordained ministry – specifically priesthood – she addressed what she called firstly, the “recent Anglican tendency to wallow in priestly powerlessness, failure, confusion and self-abnegation – as if this were a virtue in itself, rather than the unfortunate perversion of a truly kenotic Christ-likeness.”

Secondly, she raised what she called the “notable turn in priestly life to secular bureaucratic models of ‘leadership’, efficiency and mission-efficacy, and the almost unnoticed idolatry of busyness.”

Thirdly the “need for a new theology of gender and sexuality – not boxed up into readymade categories of ‘orientation’ and sexuality.”

Perhaps keeping these matters before us with open minds, and hearts may be part of how we step together into these next years of redefining what Anglican orthodoxy is and can be. Next steps of the movement which real life and theological endeavour require. Next steps in the movement of a clearly articulated and confident ministry which look back with thanks and forward with enthusiasm.

This quote from Monica Furlong, author, poet – a long time member of another movement, the movement for the ordination of women, written some years ago still has something to say to us – both lay and ordained.

I am clear about what I want from the clergy. I want them to be people who can, by their own happiness and contentment challenge my ideas about status, success and money and so teach me how to live more independently of such things. I want them to be people who can dare, as I do not dare, and as few of my contemporaries dare to refuse to work flat out and to refuse to work more strenuously than me. I want them to be people who dare because they are secure enough in the value of what they are doing to have time to read, to sit and think, and who face the emptiness and possible depression which often attacks people when they do not keep the surface of their mind occupied. I want them to be people who have faced this kind of loneliness and discovered how fruitful it is, as I want them to be people who have faced the problem of prayer. I want them to be people who can sit still without feeling guilty and from whom I can learn some kind of tranquillity in a society which has almost lost the art.

Monica Furlong (1930 – 2003)

May St Paul’s words written to the Church in Rome be your companion – for steadfastness and encouragement and fresh hope to grow into God’s future.