

Talk and Sermon for Evensong, 18th February, 2018

+ Our Lent theme this year is Remembrance, and amongst other important centenaries, a hundred years ago in 1918 women were finally permitted to vote. Not all women, but the tide had turned and within a decade men and women had equal voting rights. The right to vote was won at great cost: Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia went to desperate lengths, campaigning relentlessly, going on hunger strike and being force fed. Their fellow campaigner Emily Davison was tragically killed for the cause, when she stepped in front of a horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913.

Their struggles were worthwhile: Since 1918 millions of women have exercised their vote, we've had two female prime ministers and numerous female MPs.

In the Church, one of the last remaining glass ceilings for women in this country was smashed in 2015 when the first female bishop was consecrated. The campaign to ordain women priests and then bishops was long and often acrimonious. It led to ill-feeling and like the suffragettes before them activists were accused of being aggressive, un-Christian, ignoring Biblical teaching and going against centuries of tradition.

The need for change continues. Most recently it's become apparent that in many occupations women are paid considerably less than their male counterparts for doing exactly the same job, and the #Metoo campaign has uncovered the sad truth that women have been and are still being sexually exploited by powerful men.

Throughout the world, girls are frequently either deprived of education or removed from school years earlier than their brothers.

Sadly, inequality is still rife and we should be grateful to those women who over the centuries have campaigned and continue to campaign for change. They are the ones we should urge our young people to look to as role models: brave, courageous women who are determined to fulfil their potential and make their voice heard. The sort of women who change lives, force political debate, travel to dangerous, inhospitable parts of the world to report on current affairs, strive to make the world a better place. Women who are prepared to push boundaries and take risks. Women who have always been around, though for much of history invisible, and who though separated by millennia, hold a great deal in common with the very first woman to live on earth, Eve, part of whose story we heard in the reading from Genesis, and who I'd like to consider a bit more closely today. Thousands of years after the account of creation was formulated in such a way that the people of Israel could accept it and understand it, Eve continues to have a bad press. Eve it is still claimed went badly wrong in the Garden of Eden and she is held responsible for humanity's fall from grace. It's Eve's fault that giving birth is so painful, she was a temptress and she is held up as an archetypal example of female disobedience. Was Eve really that bad?

Even a superficially closer inspection of the reading from Genesis can help us to tell Eve's story in a completely different way. * God had told Adam, the first man, not to eat fruit from the tree but for some reason the crafty serpent speaks to Eve, not Adam, asking her a leading question: Did God say, "you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Somehow, although God had spoken to Adam, Eve knows the answer – God told them that they mustn't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, or even touch it, or they'll die. The serpent reassures Eve that God has lied. They won't die, they'll simply become wise, like God. Adam isn't included in this exchange, though presumably he's nearby. Eve takes another look at the tree, a delight to the eyes with tasty fruit. The serpent has reassured her that she won't die if she eats the fruit and understandably she thinks that to be wise would be highly desirable. So why not? She takes the fruit, eats it and gives some to Adam, who also eats. Adam is a silent, willing partner in the action. He too is prepared to push the limits of their God-

given freedom. The results are tragic, 'Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.' Before they ate the fruit they had no need for clothing – they were innocent and they had nothing to hide.

Over the centuries commentators have called for Eve's unquestioning obedience. She should have done what God said, even though God hadn't spoken the command to her. Because of her actions, all human-kind is sinful, and it'll be a long time before humanity is redeemed. The woman has been blamed, and so all women are condemned.

In fact, Eve as the first woman is portrayed as someone with initiative and courage. She pushes against God's boundaries and she tests his authority in order to understand her freedom. She recognises the beauty of the tree and she is a seeker – she wants to be better, wiser. The serpent doesn't lie to Eve. It states its understanding, she listens and she makes a conscious choice. She eats because the tree is beautiful and she seeks wisdom, not because she is wilful and wicked. She is an adventurous risk-taker. She is courageous - she eats the fruit without really knowing what the future will hold. Eve's choice to eat the fruit is the first human act of independence. Eve is given inferior status because she considered her options, made her choice, and acted on her decision. She exercised power and became the scapegoat for humanity's sin.

If Eve has become the archetypal disobedient, wilful woman, fast-forward a few thousand years and we encounter the archetypal obedient, humble woman in the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Theologians compare these two women in what's known as 'reverse typology'. Typology is a way of understanding scripture by comparing events or persons along a scale of time. So Christ is the new Adam, Elijah is a type of John the Baptist, and so on. The reverse typology focussing on Eve and the BVM is fascinating, because in it Mary's correct actions reverse all that is wrong about Eve's disobedient actions. Mary doesn't disobey God, she weighs up his request to bear a Son and makes the right choice. Mary doesn't tempt her partner, Joseph, to do wrong. Mary doesn't aspire to be greater, or wiser or more powerful – she submits to God: *let it be unto me according to thy word*. Eve's sinful actions lead to the death of humanity, Mary's role as Mother of God give birth to redeemed humanity.

There's a prayer *Ave Maris Stella* (Hail Star of the Sea) dating back to the 9th century, which cleverly, through a pun in Latin, puts this reverse typology in a nutshell:

Taking that sweet Ave, Which from Gabriel came, Peace confirm within us, changing *Eva's* name.

Ave means Hail, as in Hail Mary, and Ave spelled backwards, is Eva, the Latin for Eve. So the poem is saying that by accepting Gabriel's message, Mary reversed all that Eve did.

The problem with all this 'bad disobedient Eve vs good obedient Mary' typology is that in life nothing is that clear cut and, crucially, the theologians who have promulgated these views have been almost exclusively male. Over the years it has suited patriarchal society and the church to blame a woman, Eve, and it has suited them to place a woman, Mary, on an unrealistic pedestal. The reality is that neither Eve nor Mary have been presented to us as real women, neither all good, nor all bad, but human.

If change is to continue and women the world over are ever to become the true equals of men, then we need more brave, courageous women to make a stand. Women who are willing to push boundaries and take risks. Women like the suffragettes, like Eve, like the BVM, women who know that like men they are made in the image of God and are equal in the eyes of God. Amen.

* *Bad Girls of the Bible*, The Pilgrim Press, 1999