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## Women and the Church of England: how much has really changed?

Thu, 2020-07-30 10:57 -- Ruth Wilde



The short reflection following on below was written in 2015. I went to my archives and re-read it after the recent Chichester Episcopal Ordinations (July 2020), where the similar process as in 2015 of separate consecrations took place to avoid hands being laid on the prospective male bishop by a bishop who has ordained women. It was clear I could have written it this month in 2020. Little has changed in the intervening years.

Yes, we have a number of female bishops, but the process involved in the consecration of male bishops who do not accept female priesthood, still remains. Women are officially allowed to be seen as, "not quite the ticket".

For those not too clear, when a male bishop who does not recognise female ordination is consecrated, only those bishops who have not ordained any women may lay hands on them. Other bishops present, including either of the Archbishops of Canterbury or York who have ordained women, stand by and exercise what they call, "Generous Restraint".

Just recently (July 2020) both Archbishops announced that they will be present but not consecrate any more bishops; other bishops will do so. (*Three bishops are required to consecrate a person as bishop. From now on, the Archbishops will ask three bishops to lay on hands with other bishops present and associating with the ordination but not in fact laying on their hands.*)

This practice was further validated through the introduction of the 5 Guiding Principles and the concept of

?Mutual Flourishing? (2014), both of which are questionable. The 5 Principles are contradictory as they state, on the one hand, that all are required to accept female ordination (P1) while, on the other, those who do not accept female ordination may continue to do so (P4). At the same time, female ordinands, before they are admitted for ordination, are required to assent to the 5 principles, which includes their acceptance that the Church allows the denial of the very essence of what they are as priests on the grounds that they happen to be women. If they refuse, they are not able to be ordained (male ordinands are expected to assent to the 5 principles too). The message it conveys to women, ordained and lay, about the full acceptance and worth of their ?femaleness? by the Church is one that needs to be challenged and debated for some honest clarity and transparency.

?Mutual Flourishing?, a concept which is very one-sided in practice, allows those men not accepting of women?s ordination, for example, to prevent ordained women from celebrating at the altar and from being appointed to certain parishes, to persuade others not to appoint them, to refuse to take communion from them, plus many other activities and attitudes which are demeaning to women and which deprive parishes of the gifts of their ministries. How this can maintain a concept of ?Mutual Flourishing? is questionable. In this context, ?Mutual? and ?Flourishing? have taken on completely different interpretations from how they are commonly defined in other areas of life; that of working together, being and learning together, encouraging all individuals and groups to grow and develop regardless of who they are, what sex, race or culture they happen to be. To live and work in ways that allow gifts, abilities and understanding to develop without hindrance or discrimination is key to a full and healthy mental and spiritual development. To separate this out into parallel bubbles so those within one can flourish at the expense of excluding those in the other takes on a completely different doctrine which, I suggest, is quite alien to Christianity. Christianity tells us that we are all made in the likeness of God, and ?there is no male and female and are all one in Christ?. A confusion and puzzle indeed. Below is what I wrote in 2015 - it is just as relevant now:

### **Whose Hands Are Tainted? Sally Barnes**

Coming back from York, after the joyous consecration of our new female bishop, the Rt Revd Libby Lane, Suffragan Bishop of Stockport in the Diocese of Chester, I could not help but reflect on attitudes held towards women regarding the notion of ?taint? and the so-called breaking of the ?line of apostolic succession?. This is a belief which is held so strongly that, when a female bishop is consecrated, some bishops will not lay hands on her. Apart from the deep offence both of these views hold for women, particularly relating to "taint", serious questions need to be asked. I pondered, ?Who was it Christ actually laid hands upon?? It certainly wasn't to ordain men as priests or bishops was it? No! He laid his hands on lepers to heal them. He was touched by the woman with the issue of blood and, aware of her touch, turned and cured her. He touched and raised the dying and the dead- girls, boys, and adults. He spoke to the woman at the well, asking her for water - an act that would have involved her touching the bowl from which he would have taken a drink. He accepted the touch of the woman who bathed his feet and anointed him with oil. Did he draw back from being touched by this woman? Did he wonder if she was menstruating at the time? No! He commended her, blessed her and rebuked his disciples for disapproving of her act of generosity and love. He told them, ?I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.? (Matt 26 v13).

Jesus understood about generosity. He was rebuked for picking wheat on the Sabbath and not washing his hands. He had much to say to the Pharisees in response to their criticism; much that that they didn't want to hear. We need to ask, ?Who is the tainted one in all these stories? Whose hands (and therefore very Being) would have been thought unclean? Jesus, by his actions, in accordance with the religious, social and cultural customs of his time, would have been regarded as contaminated, tainted, unclean, breaking the mould, and yet, he repeatedly touched and healed those who needed him- male and female. I wonder, then: ?What he is saying to us today??, ?What is he trying to get us to understand??, ?What are we meant to learn from this man who tried to turn upside down constructs we have created throughout time that seek to exclude those who are regarded as outside the ecclesiastical and social norms?? As I was wondering this, my train drew into Kings Cross and I ceased to wonder ? just for the time being.

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