

Today is a special day in the life of our small church. Almost 15 years after my ordination as a Bishop, I have the blessing today of ordaining my first female priest. Some may say that theologically speaking I cannot ordain a woman as a priest - that the priesthood is reserved to men because Jesus was a male and all the Apostles were male. I say there is more to the story than we read in the story, at least at some levels.

I'd like to remind you all of the Gospel reading we just listened to, it is the central mystery and prime article of our faith – the Resurrection, without it there would be no Christians, at least not of the type we profess to be. And what do we find in this Gospel chapter, besides the story of the Resurrection of Christ – a direction to the first person to see the resurrected Jesus – and make no mistake folks, that first person was a woman, a direction to go to her brothers and sisters and tell them of this resurrection. The first person told to tell the story of the Resurrection, was a woman.

It's no small coincidence that Jesus chose a woman as the first witness to his resurrection. Social norms may have dictated that men were seen as the Apostles, and women only counted among the lesser "disciples" but I wonder how different the story may have been had a woman been one of the four main evangelists? Or even if the story of Jesus had been autobiographical? Or Jewish society had not been so misogynistic. As unpalatable as that thought may be today, there can be no mistake it was thought "that Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace" ([Sirach 42:14](#)). And Josephus wrote, "From women let no evidence be accepted because of the levity and temerity of their sex" (*Antiquities*). And from the Talmud we read that "A hundred women are no better than two men". Jewish rabbis began every temple meeting with the words, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, for thou has not made me a woman."

Yet when we read the story of Jesus closely we see that he did not adhere to the notion of women being inferior in any way to men. From the very beginning of the story of Jesus we find woman at the heart of the story – Mary, Theotokos, Elizabeth – supposedly barren yet chosen to bear the forerunner of Christ, Anna – who When Jesus was taken to the temple to be dedicated, "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" ([Luke 2:38](#)). Unfortunately, we don't know what she said or how she spread the news but this woman *knew* in her heart who this child was well before the men did. We know well of Mary the worker and Martha the Confessor.

We know of Joanna and Suzanna, of the Samaritan woman at the well, and of the woman bleeding. We know of the woman being judged by the crowd. All examples of women who might otherwise have been shunned and overlooked by the ruling patriarchy but who were embraced, valued and loved by Jesus.

Let's be clear though – Jesus did not just reach out to women; he reached out to all, particularly to those excluded by society at large. He healed and performed miracles as readily for women, as he did for men. He taught both men and women. It didn't matter what their religious credentials were, or their social standing, or their lifestyle. He loved people and interacted with them in a loving, welcoming way, male and female alike; thieves, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, women and men of high and low social class.

To quote author Philip Yancey, "For women and other oppressed people, Jesus turned upside down the accepted wisdom of his day. Jesus violated the mores of his time in every single

encounter with women recorded in the four Gospels.” I think even the most traditional theologian would have to acknowledge that women played an incredibly important role in the life and ministry of Jesus. But does that alone extend to us the ability to make a woman a priest?

Well, I’ve got news folks – according to the most traditional of theologians, God made a female priest well before any independent bishop and yes, even before the Protestants. St. Bernard of Clairvaux prayed, when speaking of the Theotokos - ‘O consecrated Virgin, offer your son and present to the Lord the blessed fruit of your womb. Offer for our reconciliation to all, this holy victim, agreeable to God. The Father will fully accept this new sacrifice, this precious oblation (victim) of whom he himself has said: “This is my well beloved Son in whom I have put my love” (Mt 3, 7).’ Is this not priesthood as we understand it?

One of my favourite hymns as a child, and perhaps even now, was “Faith of our Fathers”, written by Frederick William Faber, a 19th century Anglican convert to Catholicism. Faber said, among other things, “Mary was the minister of the Incarnation: that explains everything. She had as little the right to come down from Calvary as a priest would have to leave the altar while the sacrifice of Mass is going on. She had to preside over the completion, as she had presided over its beginning . . . . Her priesthood consisted in her continuous ministry to him” That is what priesthood is all about. If Jesus made Mary Magdalene Apostle to the Apostles as he did, and God the Creator made Mary of Nazareth to preside at the Crucifixion, as an Apostle myself, I have no right to exclude any qualified person from the priesthood, regardless of their gender.

Patrice, you are not here today because you are a woman, you are here today because you are, like Samuel, responding to a call from The Lord, the same Lord who calls us all, regardless of gender, to serve as Christ did. I’m not sure if you have had visions like Paul of Tarsus, but hopefully, you too have concluded that God had called you to preach the gospel. If these things be true then, as with all the men ordained before you, you too will be a priest of the most high, a priest like Melchizedek of old.

Today is a special day in the life of our small church; it is special for all of us; it is a day blessed by God and we give thanks for this blessing.