

GENDER DISINHERITANCE : THE CALL TO GENDER JUSTICE

- a meander round biblical insights

The whole world becomes dysfunctional wherever gender disinheritance prevails. God's appointment that women and men establish a unity of status and practice which aids the world's wellbeing is built into the very fabric of the creation. This alliance is a fundamental constituent in the response we are to make to the prayer: 'Your kingdom come; your will be done in earth as in heaven' - which foresees the whole fabric of created life being transformed so that it works God's way and reaches fulfilment. In this progression human beings are invited to cooperate as junior partners. The early chapters of Genesis give witness to the basis of this intended collegueship.

Then, from Abraham on, the Old Testament relates the struggle to do or dodge God's will for the world. The New Testament confirms the continuing purpose of God, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is shown to be part of the gospel that we put an end to gender disinheritance and establish gender justice. The church has a special responsibility in this matter. It should be a pioneer. The world God so loves as to send the Son needs a restoration of human relationships as God designed them to be. It needs gender justice as a priority.

The Genesis witness

The first ten chapters of Genesis tell how the creation is constituted and summarise God's intention for it. They provide a response to the practical concern of the Hebrew people (not to make some primitive attempt at history of the world's beginnings but:) 'We find ourselves living in the world. How are we to make sense of it and find meaning for our lives?' These chapters are, therefore, not a mere introduction to the rest of the bible. They are not marginal to its essential message. They get us into the meat of central biblical concerns right away.

How are we to make sense of life? The first words of the bible give answer. 'In the beginning, God...' The revelation of what life is for and how to live it is given when we look to God to find out. Does the creation come about by blind chance? Is it the product of some evil force? Is it to be feared or welcomed? The answer comes 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. The character of God gives reassurance that the character of the creation is fundamentally good, trustworthy.

The role of humanity in creation is clearly identified. We are to 'replenish the earth and subdue it', a mandate to be fulfilled in our togetherness. On TV David Attenborough has called this a licence to exploit. Certainly the sense of the word translated 'subdue' is to 'hammer down'. I do not doubt David's integrity but he has simply got it wrong, on two counts.

a) Whatever hammering down may be called for, it will not be to suit human convenience or interests but must be according to what fits in with God's intention for all life. That will always imply for us a struggle for light. Badgers need to be culled because they infect cattle with T.B? The evidence is missing, say protestors. There is no straightforward case, only one to be worked out.

b) The second creation story depicts humanity put into the world as into a garden 'to cultivate it and take care of it', that is to love it into shape.

So the mandate given to humanity is to procreate, and to take charge, under God, of the management of the world. This will include both hammering into shape and loving into shape. An example can be found in the responsibility we have in relation to species. Some animals breed in proportion to the food resources available –

others, such as deer, observe no such constraint and may damage their own lives thereby. Culling can have the objective to promote health in a species. On the other hand, species in danger of extinction can be protected to ensure that the richness of creation may not be carelessly impaired. So hammering into shape and loving into shape may go together.

Roles and Relationships

It is in this context that the question is raised – what kind of creatures are we human beings and how are we called to fulfil our role in the whole of created life?

The writers of Genesis deal with this question in parable form. What we get is not an attempt to portray the life of the first man and first woman. The original language makes that clear. With us, today, Adam and Eve are names identifying persons. The garden of an Adam was over the dyke from ours in Forres. An Eve lives next door in Gargunnoch. The Hebrew word ‘adamah’ means ‘earth-dust’ and ‘hawwah’ means ‘life’. So these are representative names indicating the essence of human nature male and female. To take ‘man of dust’, ‘life-source woman’ and a talking serpent as a primitive source of history fails to take into account the intention of the original writers.

What kind of stuff are we humans made of? The narrative depicts God as acting like a potter, taking earth-dust, shaping it into a male form; then bringing it alive by inbreathing divine breath. The two sides of our nature are thus described and integrated. We are ‘of the earth, earthy’. We also have a family likeness to God. In recent history T. S. Eliot has made the point about our nature in his poem ‘The Rock’. We are ‘valiant, ignoble, dark and full of light’. Solzhenitsyn observed that the battle line between good and evil runs through every person’s heart.

Eve is depicted as sharing the same essential nature as the male. God takes part of the male and shapes it into a woman. The Hebrew for the part is most often translated by the word ‘rib’. But the original wording indicated just ‘part of the side’ of the male. This suggests a side-by-side relationship. That they are made for each other is depicted in Adam’s outburst of ecstasy: ‘Bingo! At last here is someone who is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’ - recognising that they were designed to make up life in unbroken solidarity.

The narrative goes on ‘...she shall be called woman because we are of the same stuff’. This is often interpreted as meaning that the male names the woman. Naming implies ‘having power over’, as is the case with the naming of the animals. A later reference has been used to back up the argument that, in the created order, the male was meant to be ‘the head of the female’, for in Genesis 3.20 it is said that ‘Adam named his wife Eve’. But in Genesis 2.23 the word is ‘her name *is* woman’. In human life as it was meant to be, responsive to God, the verb is passive ‘this is who she is’. The identity of the woman as being of the same substance as the man – different from other living creatures – is expressed onomatopoeically thus in the Hebrew: the male is ‘ish’, the female ‘ishshah’. It is in different circumstances that Adam is said to name Eve as he named the animals. It is when God’s way has been rejected. The context of the male *giving* woman her name is a world gone awry. The ground is cursed. It produces thorns and thistles. It is in a world which needs to be redeemed that the male dominates the woman.

The woman/man relationship which expresses God’s will puts them on an equal footing. They are alike made ‘in the image of God’. Their roles and gifts are complementary – as the shining buckle of a belt needs the tongue of leather to be inserted to give it meaningful existence. It is nonsense to ask which is more

important, the buckle or the tongue. It is in their togetherness that their importance is made clear.

The Test

The creation is shown to be designed for a harmony of life to which women and men bring co-partnership skills. But human beings who are made with a family likeness to God, and who are still as human as they make them, may have usurping tendencies – be discontented to be second-in-command, tempted to let the worst side of their nature take over. That realistic possibility is addressed in perceptive stories in Genesis chapters 3 and 11. The first of these has provided a basis to denigrate women.

The characters in Genesis 3 are man, woman and a talking serpent. In ancient Semitic lore the serpent was a symbol for cunning craftiness. (It must not be equated with Satan who does not appear till later history). It stands for the insidious inclination which can burrow itself into human decision-making suggesting ‘You would be better off if you...’ (‘took your own way’, ‘looked after yourself’) when met with a challenge from a higher authority.

The world is depicted as a garden in which God’s generosity is expressed by an abundance of fruit trees. The fruit of one is forbidden to human beings – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ‘Knowledge’ in the Hebrew understanding included both information which can be received, checked and built into how life was lived and insights gained through relationships. In human life a man and woman who fancy one another can get knowledge of one another through a relationship of courtship – sussing one another out to find whether or not a more committed relationship makes sense and would be rewarding. The word for sexual intercourse – ‘Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived...’ is the word used also for knowing God. We get such knowledge not only by scientific enquiry but as the fruit of entering into a relationship. This allows us to find what is real and genuine and can be trusted to live by, in contrast with what may be more ephemeral.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil presents a major choice in life. To know good and evil *as God* implies to take charge of identifying which is to be which, something in God’s sole prerogative. It is for us as human beings to choose between good and evil courses – the challenge to Adam and Eve. It is not for us *as humans* to lay down which attribute is to be which. The insinuation that that final say-so should be in human hands leads to destruction of life.

The response of human beings to the challenge God sets has been used to denigrate women. Eve was taken to be the sinner who gave in, rejected the test to decide what is and is not ‘for us’ as human beings, ate the forbidden fruit and gave to Adam. This reading ignores what is there in the total text.

Although the emphasis is on their solidarity in sin as in life’s promise, it is Eve who actually comes over as the stronger character. She at first brushes aside the temptation. God provides abundantly for human need. After all only one kind of fruit is forbidden. But the temptation recurs – why be restricted when all life could be your oyster. She gives in. Adam shows no such resistance. He just fancies the fruit and eats, careless of God’s commandment.

When they are found out, Eve simply takes her medicine. Adam tries to put the blame on Eve – and on God for creating her. The one whom he had hailed as ‘bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh’ becomes ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate’. The main point remains – their solidarity in sin – but the male is depicted as much the weaker.

A story in chapter 11 covers the same ground. It speaks of the tower of Babel built to fulfil a human ambition: ‘Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with the top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves...’ The drive to reach to what was thought of as being God’s territory, to take over, and to make a name for themselves when the great name should be God’s, involves men and women together in a course which leads to disaster. Not any kind of togetherness will do, only obedient togetherness.

The strong point in these early stories is the emphasis on the kind of partnership we are invited to develop, to share with God in managing the world’s life. God knows the whole scene, knows what is good and evil as we do not. As apprentices looking to a master craftsman we human beings are called to live and learn, and share in God’s initiative.

Contemporary Witness

The whole world is damaged when men dominate in roles and in decision-making - as it would if women elbowed men aside! Their mentalities and sensitivities need one another to enlarge and correct human vision and develop imaginative enterprise. It is a matter of practical importance that steps be taken to remedy the present destructive situation. This has been emphasised in a report made public in ‘The Guardian’ of 20th September 2012. I quote –

A 2000 UN security council resolution that called for equal participation for women in “the maintenance and promotion of sustainable peace” has been almost totally ignored, not least by the UN itself, says the report.

It goes on –

A report published today by the Institute of Development Studies, funded by Action Aid and Womankind Worldwide, argues that this absence of women from official peacekeeping is not only a waste of a powerful resource for conflict resolution but also means peace deals are seriously flawed, taking a narrow definition of what constitutes enduring peace that mostly ignores the needs of women and girls.

The report, *From the Ground Up*, surveyed Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone and found that in local settings women took a broader view of peace that included basic rights such as freedom from violence in the home, as well as education and healthcare.

“In contrast, men have a greater tendency to associate peace with the absence of formal conflict and the stability of formal structures such as governance and infrastructure,” the report said.

The difference means that in Sierra Leone, for example, generally classified as post-conflict, most women did not consider themselves to be living in peace. “This is attributed by respondents to the high rates of poverty and violence against women, including domestic violence, mental abuse and abandonment.”

“We’re not talking about a big war,” said one woman from Afghanistan, “but peace for us also means no domestic violence.”

The survey of the five countries found that women and girls had a tendency to form groups and coalitions to deal with problems and got on with resolving conflicts up to the point when the process became formal, when the men took over. The higher and more formal the level of peace-building, the smaller the degree of female participation, the study found.

Shalah Farid, a lecturer at Kabul University said Afghan women were largely excluded from official attempts to find a political settlement. “In the high-level peace council there are only seven or nine women – they don’t have real power and

time to engage in a real peace process. They are just symbolic. People use security as a way of denying women the right to participate. People are saying women cannot keep secrets so we cannot involve them in confidential discussions.”

The Afghan experience was not unique. “The skills of women as mediators and decision-makers within the home and their experiences building trust and dialogue in their families and communities are frequently dismissed as irrelevant or not sufficiently valued by national governments, the international community or by women themselves,” the study said.

The study recommends a quota of 30% women’s participation in “all local, national, and international peace negotiation processes”, and urges governments to keep to a UN target of 15% of peacebuilding aid to address women’s needs.

This statistic can be added:

Fewer than one in 40 of the signatories of major peace agreements since 1992 have been female, according to the UN development fund for women, Unifem. They played a bit part in settlements in El Salvador, Guatemala, Northern Ireland and Papua New Guinea, but in 17 out of 24 major accords – including Croatia, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Liberia and Sudan – there were zero female participation in signing agreements.

Note this, made public on 15.10.2012:

“Sexist stereotypes, humiliating photographs of women and male bylines dominate the front pages of British newspapers, according to research by the industry body Women in Journalism (WiJ)

Male journalists wrote 78% of all front-page articles and men accounted for 84% of those mentioned or quoted in lead pieces, according to analysis of nine national newspapers, Monday to Saturday, over the course of four weeks.”

An Old Testament Perspective

With Genesis chapter 12, we move into Old Testament history where male domination proves to be endemic. Who said ‘Don’t believe in things just because they appear in the bible’? Jesus did. On the road to Emmaus, he met up with two disciples and, ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures’. We are not to take biblical points at their face value, but struggle to find in them what are in accord with ‘the things about himself’. We are obliged to do a perceptive sorting out. Those who say they believe in the bible from cover to cover go counter to Jesus’ warning about the critical perception which needs to be brought to bear. Take just one instance. How are we to treat enemies? In psalm 137 we are advised to get hold of their little ones and bash them against a rock. Jesus said we are to love them and do good to them. We cannot have it both ways. We must seek the true way.

Biblical genealogies are more concerned with continuity in the struggle for light throughout history than with historical accuracy, though, in places, these may concur. They normally describe the descent, through generations, of the male line. So it is of significance that, in the genealogy of Matthew which brings the promised line in the Old Testament into New Testament times five women appear as links in that chain. God is not bound. When Samuel the prophet took upon himself to find a successor to King Saul and was led to consider Jesse’s sons, Eliab seemed to have all the attributes of kingliness. Samuel reminded himself: ‘The Lord does not see as human beings see – they look on the outward appearance, the Lord looks on the heart’. David, the youngest, was not even considered at first – but was chosen. Throughout the Old Testament there are signs that God chooses whom God chooses and that is that,

whether or not they belong to the chosen people. (Ruth did not)

So we have, in the genealogy:

Tamar who was made pregnant by Judah, her father-in-law, who took her for a prostitute.

Rehab was the prostitute who hid the two Israelites who spied out the land to bring about the fall of Jericho.

Ruth was the Moabitess, not in the line of descent from Abraham.

Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite whom David (the psalmist!) got killed in order to make her his wife. (The continuing power of parable to bring home to people the evil they have perpetrated is illustrated by Nathan the prophet's way of facing David with God's reckoning.)

Mary, Jesus' mother, whose affianced, Joseph, came from the line of David, is described as being made pregnant 'before they came together' by the Holy Spirit.

The Jesus Revolution

Jesus came announcing 'You have heard what old-timers say, but I say to you....'; 'before Abraham I am'; John's gospel announces 'The law was given through Moses – grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'; he himself said 'I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it'. Literalism is shown the door. With the coming of Jesus Christ we enter a new era of freedom. 'Christ is the end of the law'. He is its fulfilment.

That freedom entails a rejection of second-class status for women. God's original intention for creation is restored by Jesus Christ, witnessed by his life on earth, his death and resurrection.

Jesus, in his earthly life, treated women with the same courtesy and concern that he showed to men.

He did this, for one thing, by drawing people in to fresh perceptions of life's demand and promise by his use of parables. The parable of the Good Samaritan brought home to hearers that a rich quality of life may be found in all kinds of people, whatever their racial and social standing. He broke through barriers which would have precluded him from even speaking to the woman at the well – doubly defiled as she was – mere woman and Samaritan to boot. He touched and healed those labelled unclean, of both sexes. He dealt with all kinds of people according to God's original intention, restoring the true relationship of fractured humanity by the way he dealt with all in need.

His trust in Martha and Mary, his recourse to their home and company as a retreat to restore his strength, led to Mary's anointing Jesus' feet, prophetically presaging his burial, and to Martha's definitive declaration of faith 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'. Her confession is almost the same as Peter's yet has been neglected, not given the same prominence as that of a male (whom Jesus would later call 'Satan'!) Confronted by the woman taken in adultery (where was the man?) he outfaced her accusers. His 'Let anyone among you who is without sin first throw a stone at her' placed their set-piece test of his judgement in a wider ethical context than laws which selected women for severest penalties.

Is it not significant that it was a woman whose action initiated Jesus' mission and a woman who confirmed that it would become wider than that to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'? In each case Jesus seems to need to test the authenticity of signals

he gets to point a way. In long sessions of prayer he seems to have directly gained light on the path to follow – as in the garden of Gethsemane where the struggle of a truly human being to be sure of God’s will brought out sweat like great drops of blood. In the end, the plea that the cup of agony might not have to be drunk gave way to ‘Not my will but yours be done’, and his steps were directed to the last week of suffering and death.

At other times he seems to have been open to signals which might direct his path. These would come along the way. They had to be tested to check their source in God’s will.

a) At a wedding feast to which he and his trainees had been invited, the wine ran out. His mother drew his attention to the fact. His reaction seems to be curt: ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me. My hour has not yet come’. His mother, maybe not too sure herself whether she should be urging him into a new phase of life, simply said to the servants ‘Do whatever he tells you!’ Jesus then realised that his hour *had* come.

b) Jesus understood that his mission was to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. Mission has to start somewhere, not up in the air. When a Syrophenician woman accosted him, pestered him to heal her daughter, Jesus had needed a break. He went to the region of Tyre and ‘entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there’. It took it out of him to do healings and he needed time to recoup energies. A Syrophenician woman, not one of the chosen people, cried after him to heal her daughter. Should the scope of his mission be widened at that point? – there was no virtue in undertaking a draining healing experience which went beyond his calling. He pointed out that food should go to the children (Jews) not dogs (Gentiles). He needed to husband his energy, set himself priorities. The woman refused to be put off – dogs under the table can still get leavings which drop down from the table. Jesus recognised both the love for her daughter and her confidence in his ability to heal at a distance. These were signs of faith which called for an answer. He gave it, healing the unknown child. Another signal had been given by a woman. Time to expand his mission had arrived. In each case a reluctance on Jesus part to accept the signal had been overcome. Both stood up to his test ‘Was this God’s will?’

There were powerful signs in Jesus’ resurrected life, two of which confirm and validate the need for gender justice. The signs indicated for followers the way forward. He had told his disciples ‘The kind of things I do you are to do also – and greater things you must tackle because I go to the Father’. What they had seen of his words and actions belonged to what was possible in a genuinely earthly life. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension provided much greater scope. They could build on his life, be ‘clothed with it’ and play their part in realising God’s original intention for the whole creation, ‘do greater things’.

Resurrection Witnesses

a) Jesus in his resurrected life, might have been expected to appear first, personally, to Peter. But it was to Mary Magdalene that that experience was given. Peter went away from the tomb scratching his head, bewildered. Even when Jesus appeared on the seashore and there had been a miraculous haul of fish, Peter had to have his eyes instructed by ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ before he recognised Jesus.

b) The first band of witnesses to whom Jesus made himself known might have been expected to be the apostles. It was a bunch of women, intent on anointing a body which was no longer there!

We are in a new ballgame. The resurrection both makes sense of the past and turns the future upside-down, pointing away from accustomed roles and types of status to a new order of being where first shall be last and last first.

In the Lost Gospels Mary Magdalene is described, post-resurrection, as the one the other disciples specially trusted and turned to. Peter is shown as resenting her place, one which he believes should be his own. Mary makes it clear that all she is doing is what Jesus asks of her. Peter should not look on that as a threat. Peter takes time to adjust to the new situation.

The encounter on the seashore after the resurrection has nuances which suggest something is going on which does not quite surface. Jesus thrice asks Peter whether he can depend on his love. Peter gets upset at the repetition, not recognising these avowals cancelled out three betrayals. In each one Jesus presses home 'feed my lambs, feed my sheep'. He goes on to tell Peter - as life goes on, change must be faced (this seems to me to be a more likely explanation than that this is a prefiguring of the death Peter would endure). Peter is confused and attempts a distraction. Nearby was 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. Peter asks 'What about him'. 'None of your business!' said Jesus, 'Your business is to follow me and feed my sheep', that is 'stick to essentials, never mind status'. When Peter concentrates on Jesus' life and witness and accepts the new order, his leadership and bravery come once more to the fore. When the religious authorities jailed those whom they counted to be offenders against the law 'they were amazed at the boldness of Peter and John' who, when ordered to shut up, simply said: 'Should we obey you, rather than God?'

That the first band of witnesses should be a bunch of women with no status clearly stuck in the craw of the original band of apostles. The testimony to the resurrection which Paul received airbrushes out the women to whom Jesus first chose to appear. It is fortunate that we have the gospels to correct the version which is given in first Corinthians 15: 'he (Jesus) appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time....' History is tampered with to reinstate male priority. But the gospels' testimony stands witness to the reality.

The Struggle for Light

The struggle goes on through the New Testament, where it is recorded that women as well as men were leaders in the new house churches. On the basis that men should be considered to be 'head' of the women it continues to be contended that females should play a subsidiary role. Note the lame argument of the writer to Timothy – who otherwise interprets Paul's thought accurately and may provide, in some cases, direct quotations – that Adam came first and Eve was accordingly derivative. If the writer had taken note of the first chapter of Genesis this argument would have been punctured. Darkness came before light – did that make it superior? Robert Burns uses the idea of apprenticeship to counter any such suggestion, declaring of Nature that:

'her 'prentice han' she try'd on man
An' then she made the lasses, O'

Look at another knotty point. The observation in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians: '...women should be silent in the churches: for they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate' may be found bracketed in some translations. It has all the features of an insertion by a scribe. For one thing it interrupts the argument which goes naturally from verse 32 to verse 37 (on prophecy and prophets). For another it contradicts what is said in chapter 11 where women praying and prophesying is taken

to be a normal feature of worship.

Paul speaks of man as head of woman? Look at what he says in Ephesians 5.22-25. 'The husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church' Husbands are then urged 'love your wives as *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*'. There cannot be a greater servanthood than that of husbands!

Paul at last works his way through the traditional social view of women's status to affirm their changed place in the new dispensation. He reaffirms God's original intention in making women and men in his image and likeness. Women and men are of the same stuff, have one calling to respond to, are on an equal footing in doing so, each needing the other. They are called to act in solidarity in their response to God's calling. Galatians 3.28 puts it 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus'. Colossians 3.11 makes the same point: 'In the renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free but Christ is all in all'.

In church and society we are called to reaffirm God's original intention, recognise that many distortions in the way the world works can be attributed to the marginalising of women's contribution. We are called to pursue gender justice recognising this is part of the good news of Jesus Christ which we are to implement. It forms a significant claim on our time, attention, and use of resources.

Since this is at the heart of the gospel the church should take a lead in promoting gender justice as a saving factor, important for our children and for our planet.

It is in a gingerly and somewhat half-hearted way that wrongs are being put right over the centuries. There still is a very long way to go and world and church suffer from deprivation of gifts derived from what should be interlocking gender contributions. At fault is the kind of power which Jesus called us to reject, top-down power. We need to recover servant status, servant power. We need to take seriously the needs of the creation and God's purpose for the whole creation. We need to take the gospel seriously. 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring'. No one is to be debarred or devalued, nor must males be allowed to decide the service and status of women.

In the order of the creation women are the child-bearers and substantially child rearers. We men have taken advantage of the way in which that ties women while we have been free to roam. It was convenient for us to divide responsibilities into two spheres – the domestic, where women were in charge and the public where the will of men prevailed. But we are 'one in Christ Jesus', and must make that clear in practice.

Our Calling

The church, which should have been prophetic, has been laggard. During the parish ministry of Margaret and myself in Rosyth, 1948-60, the kirk session was all-male. Women were not ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. What a richness has been gained with kirk sessions in which male and female minds are brought to bear and ordained ministries of both sexes provide leadership!

Defences are put up and spurious reasons given for resorting to them.

'We must hold to tradition and not give in to pressures of society!' But living tradition uses past practice as a springboard, not as a ball and chain. Jesus said that we had the living tradition he left to guide us here so that 'greater things than these shall you do because I go to the Father'. Society is itself a reluctant adjuster to needed change. On 21st August 2012 the front page of 'The Guardian' carried this announcement: 'Eighty years after it opened and 22 years after it admitted its first

black member, Augusta National golf club – home of the U.S. Masters – admitted its first time female members yesterday, including the former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice’. It took a ten years’ campaign to achieve this tiny breakthrough. In society disinheritance is still ingrained. It provides no model for the church to imitate.

‘The apostles were all male – the ordained must follow suit!’

a)The apostles were also all Jews. They were married – Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9.5: ‘Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas (Peter)?’ They were all mid-Eastern. To be ordained (appointed is all that that means) do you need to be Jewish, married, mid-Eastern? The apostles provided a springboard. Most of them disappeared from sight – hopefully into the house churches which sprouted all over the place -which threw up their own leadership.

The ball and chain of male dominance holds the church back from being the church of Jesus Christ and robs the world of contributions required to develop a world order marked by justice, truth and peace.

A determinative sign of the way society should live is found in the Trinity. Submission is functional and transitory not definitive of status. There is no fiat of the Father insisting that Jesus become incarnate. He emptied himself of the attributes of Godhead to be as human as they make them. Having fulfilled the Trinity’s will, he resumed his place in the Godhead, bringing what it is to be human vividly into its heart (note the great graph of descent and ascent in Philippians 2.5-11 – a sign of the mind we must cultivate if we are to share in the fulfilling of God’s good promise for the world’s life). The Holy Spirit fulfils the will of the Father and Son in conveying that mind to human beings – not only Christians but all who seek to live with integrity and compassion for others. Assignments in the Trinity are functionally different in order to get particular agreed mandates dealt with, but do not disturb their oneness of being. That oneness is what Jesus prays that human beings will enter into fully. One implication is that different assignments on earth may mean functional submission to one another to achieve a variety of objectives, but that must not produce forms of imposed submission such as women have suffered over centuries.

Holy Spirit of God, run a thread of Kingdom promise through the broken fabric of this world, unravelled as it is as long as women are given a lesser place than men; to knit together fragmented pieces that we may seek to implement God’s original intention for the fulfilment of the earth’s promise:

‘God created humankind in his image, with a family likeness to himself – male and female he created them, blessed them and said; ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.

Together have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’.

We ask this in the name of the one who lived, died and rose again that the whole creation might find its true life. Amen.

