

St George's Sermon Series: Remembering Women

Romans 16:1 – 16 and John 8:1 – 11

HOW WE 'SEE' MEN AND WOMEN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

By Reverend Rebecca Newland (29/30 October, 2005)

Thank you Deb..... it is wonderful to be here and it is especially great to be asked to deliver a sermon on women. I was once told in preaching classes to never make sermons too personal. Well I'm afraid this sermon is probably one of the most personal I have ever given. In a very quiet way the topic of remembering women is one that is very close to my heart and my story and I'd like to say thank you to Neil and the team for inviting me to be part of this series. Women are of course important in all our lives. Deb's story, told so beautifully, shows just how important women are. Her reflections on her mother, and her love, her faithfulness remind us all of the impact women have on our lives. I think it is awesome that we have a police officer like Deb, a woman who has the example of her mother, to guide her and show her how to be compassionate and faithful. The beauty about Deb's story is that it shows us that women are in all walks of life doing amazing things and doing them well. This series is about that, remembering women, their stories, their spirituality and how that enriches our life, and I know you are going to hear some wonderful testimonies and sermons over the next few weeks.

We all know that although there are plenty of women to remember in the Christian story it doesn't often happen – at least not as often as we remember the blokes in our lectionary readings and celebrations. Men like Paul, Peter, Moses, King David, Abraham, the 12 apostles and all the rest. If we do hear of women in these stories they are more often than not on the periphery and at times portrayed negatively. We just have to think of the seductress Bathsheba or Sarah mistreating Hagar or Rebecca scheming to disinherit her firstborn son or the prostitutes and sinners in the gospel stories. Many of the stories of women are simply never read out in church - like the story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, or Deborah the judge.

There is so much that someone could preach on about women, honouring and remembering them it is hard to know where to start. That has been one of my problems the other is that as a visitor to St George's I don't know much about this community. So not knowing much about this place I went to the St George's web page and had a bit of a surf. I read through some of Neil and Matthew's sermons to see what sort of sermons usually got delivered here. I looked through all your activities and skimmed some documents. Eventually I looked up at the top right hand corner and saw these words:

- Meeting with God
- Meeting with each other
- Meeting with the world.

That was St George's vision I realized. What a good one folks.

Meeting with God. Meeting with each other. Meeting with the world.

Being part of a church is certainly about community, about being with others.

We meet and greet each other in all sorts of ways don't we? From that casual quick 'Hi' as we rush past to that intense, warm, meeting full of joy and expectation. When I meet my son who now lives in Sydney my heart leaps, I am so happy to see him. When I meet my husband after the end of a long day it is with relief, thankfulness and peace. When I meet my doctor to hear some test results it is with trepidation and then some worry over the price of the extended consultation. How we meet each other depends on what we see, and in a very real way that is about what we remember. You might have heard the idea that we never really see anybody truly for who they are. Instead we see our projections, or assumptions, or expectations, or who they were for us 5 years ago, or who they were for us in that awful meeting. We see what we remember.

Many of you have probably experienced that Christmas time thing when family members get together and everybody runs the same old script about each other that has been running of years. I go home at Christmas and I know someone will trot out that story of how I couldn't find Hamilton post office even though I was standing right next to it. Everybody else fall around laughing 30 years after the event. I find it pretty tedious. Whether it is at Christmas or other times we often do not really see someone for who they truly are and who they have perhaps now become.

In some times and in some people are seen in the most destructive, dreadful ways. Some people are seen not as people at all but as objects to be manipulated and abused.

I have a pen friend called Petrina. I met her 5 years ago when I was traveling in the Philippines with ABM to look at community development projects. Petrina took care of me when I was ill and the rest of the group was off doing other things. Petrina is a mother of 5 children and she and her husband are very poor rice farmers. In the Philippines hundreds and thousands of women go and work as domestic servants in other countries, countries like Malaysia, Arabia and Kuwait. They are contracted for years at a time to a particular employer. They say the whole Filipino economy depends on these domestic workers who send money back home. These workers have no rights and because they are poor they are basically at the mercy of system. Because Petrina needed money for expensive medicine for one of her children she decided she needed to do this type of domestic work. She now lives and works in Kuwait. But like many, many other women she has had some dreadful experiences. For a number of years she worked 18-hour days, 7 days a week; her employers, both men and women, have beaten her. She has lived in terror of sexual abuse and rape. She has been treated not as a person, but as a thing.

Luckily through church contacts I was able to arrange the Anglican priest near her to visit her and through that she found a community of people that now look out for her. They eventually have helped her found a new employer where she is not beaten and the hours worked is reasonable. But there are so many people in Petrina's situation who suffer terribly. They are not treated as a person. They are not even seen as person. When people tell you slavery is non-existent, do not believe them.

And it begins with how we see another person, how we remember them, whether male or female, old or young. If we are able to define someone as less than human, less than us, somehow intrinsically different and inferior it opens the floodgates for untold abuse. And this stuff starts small...between ourselves, in our own communities.

The church has had many ways of looking at, of meeting people, of meeting the world around it. And it is no news that women have had some short shrift. I have lots of friends, what you might call post-modern feminist friends and they know the history of the church. After all it took the church centuries and centuries to decide that slavery was a bad thing. My friends know only too well how the church has often got things wrong and they know how women have been forgotten. Well not just forgotten – blamed for the evil in the world, burnt as witches, denied property and voting rights etc etc etc. ...and they say to me “Why Rebecca, why would you want to be part of the church. You’re a rational, educated, sensible, together person. What’s going on!?!?”

And I say because of a story, the story of a man. I know this is a series about women but I realized that I could not preach about this topic without talking about the person who makes my being as a woman make sense, gives it meaning and depth.

There is a story about Tony Campolo, an American theologian, who was trying to get his students to see what an amazing person Jesus was. He asked his students what some of the world's great religious leaders might have said about prostitution. The discussion was lively and intense. He asked them, "What do you suppose Jesus would have said to a prostitute?" He was ready to point out to his class the compassion and understanding which Jesus had for prostitutes. He was going to do his best to make Jesus look greater than all the religious leaders put together. He asked them again, "What would Jesus have said to a prostitute?"

A Jewish student spoke up saying, "Jesus never saw a prostitute."

Campolo jumped at the opening. Here was his chance! He would show this young Jewish boy a thing or two about Jesus and the New Testament.

"Yes, he did. Jesus did see a prostitute. I'll show you in my Bible where..."

The young man interrupted. "You did not hear me, Doctor. I said Jesus never saw a prostitute."

Again, Campolo protested and started leafing through the pages of his Bible to find the passages that showed Jesus forgiving the fallen woman. He searched for the place where He gave the woman at the well a chance for spiritual renewal. He searched the bible for the story of the women caught in adultery so he could show Christ's wisdom and compassion.

Again, the student spoke out, this time with a touch of anger in his raised voice. "You're not listening to what I am saying. I am saying that Jesus never saw a prostitute. Do you think that when he saw Mary Magdalene he saw a prostitute? Do you think that when he saw the women caught in adultery he saw a prostitute, a sinner, an unclean woman?"

And Tony Campolo, very embarrassed, finally got it.

The story we heard from John's gospel is the one about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.

Here was a woman who was caught in the act, red handed. There was no doubt that she was an adulteress and according to the law of the time was to be stoned to death. It was obvious to everyone that she was bad news. It was right before their eyes. Memory and assumption played no part in this knowledge. It was fact.

But Jesus does something quite extraordinary. He challenges the people who have brought her before him. He confronts them with a statement..."Let anyone that among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" and one by one they disappear.

So what did Jesus see that the others could not?

Jesus I believe saw someone who was being made a victim for the failings, the problems in the community itself. Jesus saw someone who was paying the price for communities' tension, conflict and pain. Jesus saw that she was being used in the ongoing disagreement between himself and the religious leaders. And Jesus saw beyond all that. He saw beyond the games, the labels, the expectations, and the assumptions. He did not see a prostitute or an adulteress but a loved child of God, someone worthy of forgiveness simply because she was.

When Jesus is finally left alone with the woman he doesn't say:

Go and don't get it on with Fred anymore. He says, Go and do not sin anymore, something he could have said to any one there, any one of us, because the reality is we all get things wrong, make bad choices and stuff things up. That is a fact of being human, not a fact of being a woman or a man.

In fact I believe that the one place that should not matter whether you are a man or a woman or anything else is the church. I grew up in a house that was very non-churchy. My Dad was religiously an atheist and politically an anarchist. Mum was a lapsed methodist. My brothers were into rugby union and model aeroplanes. It was a working class upbringing where once when I dared to suggest to my grandfather who lived with us that a liberal government might be good thing he reacted as if I'd suggested we vote for Hitler. We all went to the local catholic school. It was there that I discovered this thing called God and the church. For some reason, that I cannot quite fathom, I loved the atmosphere of church. I loved being near God...in St.George's language, meeting God. At lunchtime I used to steal into the church that was right next to the school and just sit there. Eventually I started taking myself off to church each Sunday. I was 8 years old. I would get up while the household was all still asleep, throw on some clothes and take myself to church. I sat by myself up the front. I turned up so regularly that Mrs. Foggerty the organist started to get me to turn the music pages.

I mean how weird is that? Sunday after Sunday. If my daughter did that I'd think there was something very strange going on. But as I was reflecting on my journey of faith, its beginnings, where I am now, who I am as a 42 year old woman in this thing called the church, I realized that in this place, wonder of wonders, was where I meet God and in that meeting is complete freedom.

And that is because I feel seen – seen as a loved child of God, feel seen as who I am and despite my many failings accepted, welcomed, truly met. I am seen not as a sinner, or a women who can't

quite cut it in a man's world, or as little Rebecca who misunderstood so much about the way the world worked. I am not seen in terms of my attractiveness to men or defined in terms of my sexuality but I am seen, I am remembered, I am met wholly, completely and lovingly.

Like the woman caught in adultery or the Samaritan woman at the well, like Mary Magdalene, like the town prostitute who poured expensive perfume over Jesus feet, like the woman bleeding and like the leper I am met in a completely new, free, loving space, seen for exactly who I am and simply acknowledged, loved, strengthened.

And that knowledge becomes a challenge.

I wonder...

How do we meet each other?

Who do we see?

When we look at our children do we see the loved child of God or do we see the problem waiting to grow up?

When we meet the world do we see an object we can use and degrade or do we see a glorious creation that we are called to care for?

When we meet God do we see a power we can bend to our will, our needs, our assumptions, our prejudices or do we see love that calls us into a relationship full of hope and possibility?

I want to close this sermon with a reflection on the other piece of scripture we heard read today, the ending of Paul's letter to the Roman church. It is a piece of scripture that reveals more than just his theology or his purpose in writing it. It is a letter that shows that Paul and his readers are part of a much larger community, a new community that had some special ways of doing things. At the end of the letter is a long list of people whom Paul commends to the Roman church. Since we are on about remembering women, let me read out the girls names – that I at least can identify – There is Phoebe, a deacon, there is Mary and Junia and Persis, there is the mother of Rufus, and there is the sister of Nereus. Paul indicates that these people and the men on the list are to be welcomed, they are to be met, in a very special way. Paul says to his readers to greet one another with a holy kiss, to welcome them in the Lord.

In reading and reflecting on this I was pulled up short.

I wondered what is a holy kiss?

If I asked my husband David to give me a holy kiss, I wonder how he would do that?

How would any of us give someone a Holy Kiss?

I wondered how do you greet someone in the Lord?

What does that look like? Feel like?

I wonder if a Holy Kiss and meeting in the Lord are about remembering, as Paul urges us in Galatians and Corinthians, to honour that we have been set free, from assumptions and

expectations, from the way we have of pigeon-holing men and women. That we have been set free from condemnation and fear, that there is no division, neither slave nor free, male nor female, and that we are all one with Christ and each other. We are sons and daughters of God. And it is sacred stuff.

We are all Holy people. That is what we remember when we greet each other, when we meet man or woman, and it makes a profound difference.

Very shortly we will greet each other in the passing of peace...I leave you to wonder how you can greet those around you...if any one would like to share anything about that with me later I would love to hear what you have to say.

In a moment we will share in communion, the symbol of our unity and inclusiveness, where we meet God and each other, just as we are, forgiven, loved, redeemed. May we find our centre and joy there.

Amen