

## Sermon

There's a story [probably fiction] of the footballer – a large front-rower, who married a gorgeous, petite, blonde girl. On their wedding night they arrived in their hotel bedroom and started to undress. He took off his trousers and threw them across to her. "Put these on," he said to her. "I can't wear these," she replied, "they're far too big for me." "That's right he replied – but just you remember who wears the trousers round here."

She didn't say anything but carried on undressing. She took off her knickers and threw them across to him. "You get into these," she said. He held up the small pair of undies. "I can't get into these," he replied. "And you never will, unless you change your attitude!" She retorted.

One question today is, "Who wears the trousers?"

The Bible carries a high view of women. It does not disapprove of sexual intimacy – in fact in some places like the Song of Solomon from which our first reading came sexual intimacy is positively extolled!

So within the family – what does the Bible – and particularly St Paul say about women?

This passage from Ephesians was read at our wedding 34 years ago. At that time Liz promised to "obey" – neither of us would agree to that now! It was part of an earlier culture but nowhere in the Bible does it say that a wife should obey her husband!

[I did manage to persuade the Rector of the church to alter the order of the reasons for marriage in the old Anglican Service. The service gave the first reason for marriage as being "for the increase of mankind" and the second reason being to restrain "our natural instincts" and the third reason for "mutual society, help and comfort". But the Bible says that the first reason for marriage is for companionship – not to legitimise children!]

In the past 50 years there has been a revolution in the understanding of the place of women and men in society – and the church has been slow to catch up – some would argue that the church should not catch up. They would say that there is an order in society that men have authority and power over women – that men are superior and women are inferior.

Historically women have been dominated and oppressed by men – and they still are. Sadly this has been and still is sanctioned by the church in its teaching and in the practice of its members.

If we travel through the history of the church we find that in ancient times women were put in a place of being suppressed. Some early writers like Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, and even Thomas Aquinas or St Augustine say that "men more fully bear the image of God". The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin both agree that the "female sex is inferior to the male sex". We continue with others like John Wesley or Matthew Henry or even Donald Guthrie [writing in 1957] who agree that

women are the weaker sex, inferior to men. They argue that women are a class of people needing a man's protection.

These attitudes have kept women out of leadership in public life, out of the church, in subservience in the home.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that such attitudes are wrong and despite the common way in which people talk, they are not based on the Bible and Paul does not justify discrimination against women in church, society or home.

So far we have seen in St Paul's letter to the Ephesians that in the church, God has brought together a new society, a new humanity; and in this new society grandstanding is not how it is meant to be. There is to be love, working for the common good. Reconciliation is to characterise our attitudes.

In 5.21 he says we are to "*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*". We are to serve each other, respect one another. We are not in the church to push our own barrow, or to try to gain those leadership positions we have been denied in other areas of life.

In this context he says, "*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.*" The word Paul uses for "submit" is one that is frequently used when people want to talk about honouring or respecting a person that they think well of – indeed in v33 Paul says this "a wife must *respect* her husband". So this is not a call to servility or subservience – but an invitation to respect in the context

of a mutual respect which all people in church should exercise.

Why does he say that? If we follow his reasoning – which we shall at the moment – it is because the "*husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church*".

People have often used this term about "**headship**" to enforce a male superiority in the home, the church or indeed in public life. People argue that to be the head carries authority and power – like in the way we speak of "head-quarters, head-office or head-master" – and so they argue, men – husbands – are to have power or authority over their wives.

But we do use the word "head" in a different way. We use it to speak of "source" or energy. We speak of the source or the head of a river. In the old trains and engines we would talk about them getting up a "head of steam". In water circulation we speak of a header-tank. This is not about domination or authority but about source or energy. The word "head" in Paul's time could be used in a similar way.

We need also to remember that in St Paul's day they did not have the detailed medical knowledge about the brain and the whole nervous system of the body that we have today. We think of the head as the part of the body that controls the rest. But the head – more obviously – is the place where the mouth is! The head is the place through which the body is fed and nourished!

Paul here tells us that Christ is the head of the church – and later he goes on to say what that means – v29 Christ feeds and cares for his body – the church. In the same way, says St Paul, a man feeds his own body and so he should also care for his wife. In our Gospel reading we hear Jesus himself talking about his work – his role – of feeding the church – his people with the bread of life.

So when we read here that the husband is the head of the wife – let's not immediately take fright that Paul is speaking about domination, power and authority. Rather he is saying that just like Christ nourishes and cares for the church so a husband should do the same for his wife.

This is precisely where the real power of St Paul's writing lies. He says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

These are the words that would have rocked those men in their seats. No one would have batted an eyelid when they heard about wives submitting to their husbands, but for a husband to love his wife was counter-cultural.

1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews had a **low view of women**. In the Jewish form of Morning Prayer there was a sentence in which every Jewish man gave thanks that God had not made him "a Gentile, a slave or a woman".<sup>2</sup> Under Jewish law a woman was not a person but a thing. In the Greek world the position of a woman was worse. A Greek man expected his wife to run his home, care for his legitimate children, but he found his pleasure elsewhere. In the Roman Empire one

historian writes, "A girl was completely under her father's power, and a wife completely under her husband's power. Her life amounted to enslavement and she was described as 'imbecilitas'." It's true that there was a counter movement – seeking rights and respect for women, but this was the prevailing view.

Paul actually counters that view – the church, he says, is to be counter-cultural: a husband is to love his wife, he is to feed his wife, he is to care for his wife, he is to look after his wife – just like he would look after himself. Indeed his love and care is to be self-sacrificial: it is to be of the same quality as the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated when he sacrificed his life in order to redeem the church as his bride. A husband's love is to be sacrificial.

**Willard Waller**<sup>3</sup>, an American sociologist, spent his life studying people in order to gain an understanding of the complex interplay that goes on in human relationships. Though he wrote many research papers, his life's work can be summed up in two simple statements:

1. In any relationship one person loves more than another.
2. The person who loves the least in any relationship has most power and conversely, the person who loves most has the least power.

These two statements make up his Law of Least Love. They may appear deceptively simple but are in fact profound. He argued that in a relationship the person who

had less to lose - who was less in love - exercised power over the other person, who was more willing to sacrifice to keep the relationship alive.

Waller found that in any relationship those who were least interested in seeing the relationship continue were the ones who had the most say in determining the rules of the game. Their self-seeking power became dominant. Where there were children involved, and mothers had a vested interest in keeping the family intact, the husband often had a disproportionate selfish advantage.

Paul is saying to men, “Forget about your own fragile ego that keeps on needing to be boosted, forget about the inclination to dominate that comes from our fallen nature, forget about your love of being in control because you fear the power of love. Husbands, he is saying, “love your wives with the same self-sacrificial love that that true man – Jesus Christ – showed when he sacrificed his life for the good of the church and of all humanity.

If we in Australia on ANZAC day can praise men who sacrificed their lives for their fellows on the battle-front; why then can we not in peace-time extol the virtue of men loving their wives in the same way?

So when Paul is talking about family relationships he appeals to Jesus and he appeals to the story of creation.

**This story about creation** is formative in Paul’s thinking – we know this from several places in his writings where he speaks about the relationships between women and men.

The **first story of creation** in Genesis 1 tells us that God created men and women equal and men and women together reflect the likeness of God – they are stamped with God’s image. We read in Genesis 1.26-28, “Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness ... So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them”.

This reading carefully emphasizes the mutuality of women and men. God made both to reflect his image and he blesses them both.

There is a **second story of creation** in Genesis 2. There we find the same emphasis on the mutuality of men and women. In this story Adam is created first and he is found to be lonely – without companionship. None of the animals are suitable, so God causes him to fall into a deep sleep, extracts a rib bone and forms Eve. This is the story that St Paul quotes from when he writes, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” We see that in the Bible’s account of creation that men and women find their identity in relationship. Man is incomplete without an intimate and mutually respectful companionship with women and women likewise with men.

It is important for us to comprehend this – because in Chapter 3 of Genesis we read **the story of “The Fall”** – sin and evil coming into the world. In this account of the fall we see that disorder comes into God’s perfect creation and

part of this disorder is a breakdown in the mutuality of women and men. There is disharmony, there is domination of women by men, there is abuse of power and women become subservient to the domination of men.

Why is it so important to briefly tell this story?

Because **Jesus is the one who breaks the power of evil**; who redeems people from the power of sin; who is reconciling a fallen and broken world – bringing it back to God. As we read the New Testament we are meant to discover that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the old order of sin death and evil is being overthrown and God's new creation is being brought into being. The curse of sin is defeated and humanity is being made whole.

Given the background of his day, **Jesus' attitude towards women is remarkable.**<sup>4</sup>

- ❖ In a time when men would not speak to women, Jesus holds remarkably deep theological conversations with them.
- ❖ When rabbis would isolate themselves from the company of women, Jesus welcomes them into the inner circle of named disciples.
- ❖ When Martha is busy with home duties, Jesus does not chide for that, but he does commend Mary because by sitting and listening to him Mary shows that she wants to be a full disciple of Jesus.

- ❖ Jesus heals both women and men. Jesus receives the attention of a woman who washes his feet – even though her action scandalized the other guests at the feast. God chose women to be the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection.
- ❖ When a woman caught in the act of adultery is brought to him – in the absence of the offending male – he refuses to condemn her.

In the early church women received the Holy Spirit along with men. They were jailed and persecuted, just like men. St Paul calls one woman – Julianas – an apostle and women were deacons and leaders in churches. Paul allows them to pray and prophesie – which were the two most significant ministries in the gathered church.

Even though the church very quickly became male dominated we see the ideal there at the very beginning and it is clearly shown in the life and teaching of Jesus.

### **In conclusion**

You can see that I've only skimmed the surface and I've not really gone into the place of women in the Church – though I hope you will detect where I'm heading! Carol Anderson, one of the first women to be ordained in Canada once commented that she thought St Paul was against women, but then she realized that she had not read Paul carefully enough.

In our reading today we have seen that **each of us should respect one another**. On another occasion St Paul says, “in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had.”<sup>5</sup>

We have seen that when St Paul talks about a husband being the **head** of the wife he is not talking about domination, but about nourishment and care.

The model for family relationships is **the model of Christ** himself – the model of self-giving love and the husband is called to be the one who takes the lead in this.

This indeed is the bomb-shell that Paul explodes when he writes to the Ephesians, “**Husbands, love your wives!**”

I realize that today I’ve spoken to husbands and wives here together, to people who are in relationships but not married, to people who are single, separated or widowed. I’m speaking to people where their companion does not share their Christian faith. I’m speaking to people in fragile and hurting relationships. I’m speaking to people who bear the scars of past abuse.

When we truly and deeply love someone we surrender the power to dominate or control. We seek their good – even at a cost to ourselves.

I pray that this sort of love will characterize our relationships at home and in this church – so that to God will be the glory now and forever, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> K Giles p146-154

<sup>2</sup> JRW Stott Ephesians p244

<sup>3</sup> Steve Chalke “The Lost Message of Jesus” p173f

<sup>4</sup> Walter Wink “The Powers that be” p69f

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2.3-5