

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE LECTIONARY

Marjorie Proctor-Smith has recently examined the American Common Lectionary for the images of women it portrays and has discussed some of the effects these images may have on women (1). This Common Lectionary was published in 1983 after five years work by scholars of most North American churches: United Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Catholic. As the church in Australia is still using an older lectionary, it seemed to me that it might be valuable to examine this earlier lectionary, which differs particularly in the readings chosen from the old testament, to see how women are portrayed and to consider what effects this might be having on the women of Australia.

As scripture readings are an important part of liturgical worship, the character of our worship depends significantly on what parts of scripture are included in the lectionary. The parts of scripture chosen for the lectionary, especially those chosen to be read on Sundays and major feast days, not only make up major parts of our common worship but also become central parts of the teaching process of liturgy. Liturgical readings teach both by the outright exhortations they contain and also by the way the readings hold up models of good behaviour, models of people living the way God wants us to live. The unspoken exhortations that these models give us are often more powerful than are the outspoken messages and commands. They implant in us images of what we should be and what is a good life. And the more these values are unspoken, the more we are likely to make them our own. So it is necessary to examine not only what the readings say about women, but also (and perhaps even more carefully) what models of virtuous women we are given.

All the scriptures, both Old and New Testament, are the products of patriarchal cultures. Hence we cannot be surprised to find that males have the dominant roles and that the text deals mainly with men. We cannot change that. Passages for inclusion in the lectionary, however, are selected and equal weight does not have to be given to all parts of scripture. The messages given in the liturgy will depend on which passages are chosen. And it is important to remember that the process of selection is itself a theological exercise and the results are a statement of values. So in the passages that are chosen for our lectionary, what part do women play? What values are being expressed? What do these passages say about women and about the role of women in salvation history? The absence of women in most of the passages chosen for the lectionary and the silencing of their voices in passages in which they do appear, would seem to suggest that the answer to these questions is that women are of little value and play no significant part in salvation history.

An examination of readings chosen from the Old Testament for the liturgies of Sundays and major feast days shows that readings have been primarily selected to foreshadow and foretell the coming and the actions of the Messiah. First there are readings from the prophets. Second, readings are chosen which can be used to draw parallels between Old Testament and New Testament events so that Jesus can be seen to be the fulfilment of Israel's history. In addition, other readings are used which recount events of salvation history. These emphasise several male figures, particularly Abraham and Moses, through whom God is seen to have brought 'his' people to redemption. No woman is the major actor in any text chosen for a Sunday or major feast throughout the three-year cycle.

A clear example of the way in which the women are portrayed is found in readings selected from the story of Sarah and Abraham. In them, Sarah appears twice as a character in the drama but is never allowed to speak. The two sections in which she appears are selections which culminate in the statement that Sarah and

Abraham will have a son, (I shall return to this point below.) A silent Sarah, an acquiescent and passive Sarah, is certainly not the Sarah we find in Genesis where she is active and in command. But all this authority and assertiveness are omitted from passages used in the liturgy. Again, Moses speaks and acts in nearly thirty readings in the three-year cycle. But the women whose actions saved the infant Moses are ignored; no Shiphrah, no Puah, with their act of civil disobedience without which there would have been no adult Moses; no sister nor Egyptian princess who together reached across barriers of race and class to nurture the child (2); only the fully-grown Moses speaking with God and leading the people. The message is that Moses is important: the women are insignificant. In contrast, I would suggest that stories of people reaching across barriers of race and class and stories of people gently and bravely ignoring the lethal dictates of tyrants, are critical to our very survival today and have more to tell us than do stories of the founding of nations even of the nation of Israel.

Who are the women whose voices we hear? The only female voices we hear (apart from that of Eve) are those of three women, the widow of Sidon who speaks with Elijah (1 Kings 17: 10 - 16; used on the 32nd Sunday of year B and 1 Kings 17:17 - 21 used on the 10th Sunday of ordinary time in year C), the Shumannite woman who befriended Elisha (2 Kings 4: 8 - 11, 14 - 16, on the 11th Sunday of ordinary time in year A) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:20 - 22, 24 - 28, on the Feast of the Holy Family in year C). The common theme throughout the stories of these three women is the granting to them of the life of a son in return for their love, generosity, hospitality and prayer. Both Hannah and the Shumannite woman are told that they will have a son; the widow of Sidon already has a son when her story opens: this son is restored to life by the action of Elijah. As noted earlier, the birth of a son is also the emphasis in the readings from the story of Abraham and Sarah. No doubt the Israelite people regarded the birth of a son as a great gift from God, and of much more importance than the birth of a daughter. Moreover, the compilers of the lectionary may be concerned with drawing parallels between the birth of these sons (or the raising of them to life) and the birth of Jesus and his bringing of God's life to us. But I question the wisdom for today of choosing to feature stories of women which culminate in the giving to them of a son, rather than stories which celebrate the lives and actions of women. Moreover, I question the wisdom of this emphasis on the gift of a son as God's greatest gift. Not only does it seem to deny the value of a daughter, but it proclaims that a woman's prime role is producing children, and that her fulfilment comes from that alone. The single and childless women of our communities find this insistent emphasis on children as a woman's (not a man's) fulfilment to be very painful. Is it any wonder that there is a demand for an *in vitro* fertilization program when the church continues to preach that the destiny and fulfilment of a woman's existence comes in the birth of a son?

There is a second point about the readings chosen from the stories of these three women which may be equally important. Perhaps because it was essential to the compilers that the giving of a son was included in the readings, other parts of their stories are omitted. To me these omissions are tragic. For example, in the readings from the story of Hannah, the lectionary omits her marvellous statement that "I was pouring out my soul before Yahweh ---- I have been speaking from the depth of my grief and resentment", (1 Samuel 1:15 - 17)(3). This omission means that she is unable to be heard as a model of a person engaged in open, deeply human prayer to God, prayer in which all our human feelings can be expressed. I think we need this model. Most of us have trouble with prayer and with being open with God and with one another. Or again, in the readings from the story of the Shumannite woman, Elisha is heard wishing to thank her for her hospitality. In the text (2 Kings 4:13), Elisha first asks her "Is there anything you would like said for you to the king or the commander of the army?"

Isn't this saying : "would you like me to put in a good word for you to those who hold political and military power in this country?" She rejected this replying: 'I live with my own people about me'. A woman is offered political and military might: she rejects it. This rejection is omitted from the lectionary readings which jump to Elisha's second offer in which he promises the woman a son. Here again a woman is not allowed to be seen as a person for whom being part of the structures of worldly power is not just unimportant, but is to be rejected; again a lesson I think we need today.

The use of the stories of the creation of Adam and Eve was not altered in the development of the Common lectionary, and so these sections have been analysed by Proctor-Smith (1). In summary, she shows that Adam's creation is portrayed as an essential part of salvation history, while Eve's creation is linked with the institution of marriage. The central message is clear. Men are the actors of salvation history. Women are wives and mothers.

In the selections chosen from the New Testament, the Common lectionary and the older lectionary in use in Australia are very similar; again the analysis by Proctor-Smith is pertinent to our liturgy. But it must be noted that the Australian lectionary includes readings of the greco-roman household codes (4) in both years A and B. Colossians 3, 12 - 21, which has been omitted from the Common Lectionary, is used in year A on the feast of the Holy Family; Ephesians 5: 21 - 32 is used on the 21st sunday of ordinary time in year B. Both readings state that wives should submit to their husbands. The reading from Colossians also includes the instruction to children to "be obedient to your parents always", but stops, (as does the Ephesians reading) before the instruction that "slaves be obedient to the men who are called your masters in this world". These calls for submission, these insistence on dominance-submission patterns in human relationships, support the belief that males are heads of households, that their word is law and that it is God who demands this relationship. Indeed the use in the liturgy of this reading from Ephesians seems to me to be very dangerous for women because the author parallels God's position over the church with the husbands's position over his wife: it says that as "Christ loved the church.....and made her clean, in the same way husbands must love their wives" (my emphasis). This is open to the interpretation that a husband's love and domination will make a normally-dirty woman clean and whole. How much wife-battering and incest have followed from the church's continuing to give head-of-household power to men and to give it in the name of God? Shall we ever know?

In the gospel readings, at last we find women acting, speaking, being primary actors in the drama, ministering and being ministered to. In spite of this, we find again, as Marjorie Proctor-Smith has detailed, (1), the tendency for the compilers to omit the ministering of women during recital of the passion narratives. The message would seem to be that the witness of women to the passion, death and burial of Jesus are not critical to this central story of our faith. (1). I am not suggesting that these omissions are deliberate acts to degrade women and deny their ministry. I believe that these selections are made by people who cannot possibly know the pain their actions cause to so many women.

We need to examine carefully the selections from scripture that are used liturgically. The selections used in Australia could be said, at best, to legitimate the view that women are nothing but wives and mothers. At worst they are seen to picture women as irrelevant to salvation history. This image of women as passive and unimportant, is one with which women have seemed to acquiesce. Because it is the most common image of women that both women and men have, women have accepted this portrayal of themselves as valid and have allowed themselves to be submissive; they have internalized the judgements of them made,

consciously or unconsciously, by others. This image of the passive subordinate woman is strongly reinforced by the passages of scripture selected for the lectionary and read to women and men each Sunday as 'the word of the Lord'. I would suggest, too, that the apparent unimportance of women in salvation history is reinforced by the total omission from the Sunday lectionary of any the biblical stories of horror committed against women, stories which have been so brilliantly brought to life by Phyllis Tribble in her book *Texts of Terror* (5). These stories live in our scriptures, but with no memorial of mourning in our liturgies, they remain as silent stones signifying the unimportance of women. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, the sacrifice of the life of the daughter of Jephthah carries none of the theological significance of the offering up of the life of Isaac. But it remains for women as a terrible memorial of what can be done to women - to Others - in the name of God.

In summary, the selections of our scriptures used in the lectionary for the liturgies of Sundays and major feast days portray women as insignificant to salvation history, and as of value only as wives and mothers. For the sake of both women and men, this must change. Women must be able to gain strength and courage from the lectionary, and, to do this, they need the stories of women which our scriptures contain but which have been largely ignored in the compilation of the lectionary. But it is not only women who need these stories. These stories contain powerful antidotes to some of the prevalent mores and values of our society. They show people choosing life over death, choosing to disobey laws which order killings, choosing to ignore the barriers of race, class and state which have brought hatred, wars and death, women of courage choosing the way of non-violence, women of courage saying 'no' to political power, women in touch with their emotions and unafraid to show them to God.. Do we not need their help not just for our spiritual growth, but for the very survival of humanity today?

Notes.

- (1) Proctor-Smith, Marjorie, 'Images of Women in the Lectionary', *Concilium* 182, *Women - Invisible in theology and church*, 51 - 62. (1985) ed Fiorenza, E.S. and Collins M..
- (2) Tribble, Phyllis, Thatcher Lecture, *Women's work is never done*, Union Theological College, Sydney, 1986.
- (3) All translations are from *The Jerusalem Bible*, Darton, Longman and Todd. London. 1966
- (4) see Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schussler, *In Memory of Her*, SCM Press Ltd. London. 1983, pp245 -270 for a discussion of these codes and their use in scripture.
- (5) Tribble, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.