

Empowerment of Women in Christianity

Talk for the Interfaith Peace Symposium, Marsden Park. 14th April, 2018

Outline:

1. **The Inspiration**
2. **The Struggle**
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The Inspiration: The Holy Bible...has two main sections, the Old and New Testaments. The First comprises books of Hebrew origin. In the very first book, Genesis, we learn that God created man and woman equal.

They were made in the image and likeness of God.

And God saw that it was very good.

In the New Testament we find the four gospels, letters by St Paul and other writings. We learn about Christianity and the vision and message of Jesus, the Christ. But FIRST we find the most important example of the empowerment of women; **God empowered a young Jewish girl, Mary, Miriam of Nazareth to be the mother of Jesus.**

Jesus is the inspiration for all Christians. He taught about the love of God for all, especially the poor and the outcast. Although he lived in a patriarchal society he did not allow that to cloud his conviction that God made us all equal, that God loves all, and that the law of love is greater than the laws made by men.

From the stories in the gospels we see that He was a friend to women, treated them equally, showed them compassion and understanding He was truly their friend and they responded with their fidelity.

Jesus challenged the status quo and suffered as a consequence.

St Paul, who understood profoundly the message of Jesus, wrote in his letter to the Galatians:

"..there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ" (Gal 3,28)

Equality is the key word. Made in God's image, equal and endowed with different gifts. If the gifts of both men and women are not used to the full then God's plan for humanity and for Creation will not be fully realised.

The Struggle

Patriarchy is the main cause of the disempowerment of women. This system began with "hunters and gatherers", the male hunters getting the idea that they were superior to the female gatherers. This was more than 3500 years ago. A mind set which is around for so long is not easy to change. In the early church it did not become entrenched until the emperor Constantine of Rome made Christianity the official religion in 312AD

Nevertheless, down through the centuries there have been many faith filled courageous women who have stood up against injustices, have challenged Popes, have started religious congregations of women so as to carry out the mission of Jesus. I want to mention particularly the groups which could see the need for the education of girls.

EDUCATION is a major tool for lifting women and girls out of their poverty. With education they are empowered to fulfil their God-given potential.

The Reality Today

I can see two levels, a personal one and a community one.

On a community level there are many Christian churches. I will speak about my own Catholic Church.

Since the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965, women have been more and more empowered, given roles to participate more fully. In recent times they have been given important roles in commissions regarding women in the church. The Catholic Church is still a hierarchical, patriarchal church but today the male leaders are listening and trying to give women their rightful place.

In 2020 a Plenary Council of Australia will be held. Preparations are under way now. Everyone is being asked their opinion and to express their hopes. Back in 1937 when the last Plenary Council was held there were only male participants. This time we have a woman facilitator, Lara Turvey-Collins, and women on the organising committee as well as men. One of these is Sr Grace from our Parish of Good Shepherd.

Good Shepherd Catholic Parish is a good example of a community where women are actively involved at many levels.

Right next door in Marsden Park we have a new Catholic faith community, St Luke's, where our wonderful Bishop Vincent Long has appointed Deacon Tony Hoban and his wife Annette as leaders. Recently Pope Francis has agreed to the establishing of a commission to study the possibility of re-introducing women deacons into the church structures. A woman, Phyllis Zagano is heading that commission. (In the early church there were women deacons.)

The reign of God which Jesus spoke about and dreamed about is with us today wherever there is love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and justice. Our hope is to live these values in our personal lives, in our families, in our neighbourhood, in our society. If we do this, then we will be working for peace.

Surely, this is the hope of all of us, regardless of our faith tradition, regardless of gender. We belong to the human family. Let us work for peace together.

On the personal level we see the level of a day to day living faith, which is nourished by prayer and personal spiritual practice.

I asked a friend: "How does Christianity empower you as a woman?" She replied:

"I am empowered as a Christian woman by having something/ someone to believe in and as a Mum passing the values and beliefs to my children. I ask them to be true and good people, according to gospel values, and I feel that this is a practical way of nurturing them, their spirit, their lives. This results in a ripple effect by trying to make the world a better place."

I believe that all women have a huge role to play in bringing peace to our world. May we be empowered by God's Spirit and work together.

Sr Colleen Foley osu