Sermon offered for a church discerning whether to petition for alternative episcopal oversight (Anonymised)

Firstly, I’d like to offer my thanks for having the generosity of heart and spirit to invite me to speak. It’s always a joy to come and see how others worship around the diocese, and a great privilege to offer my support and wisdom to congregations discerning their next phase of discipleship and ministry.

Let me tell you a little about myself…

The role I hold, which brings me here today, is the role of Bishop’s Advisor for Women’s Ministry for *N*. Alongside this role I am the Rector of *N*, I am a wife, a mother and an MA student at *N* researching the leadership of women in the Church. I come from a liberal Catholic tradition and practise a deeply sacramental spirituality. For me, the Eucharist is central to my faith and my ministry, so we have that in common.

In this address, I hope to support you in making a decision by offering insight into the ministry of women in biblical times and beyond. In the literature you have been given, Archdeacon *N* has helpfully summarised some of the arguments for and against such ministry. I will now develop some of what you have read.

In the Gospels, there is no denying that Jesus includes women in his ministry; they questioned him, challenged him and were given commands. For example;

* The Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 is treated as a disciple; Jesus explains the meaning of living water to her and then commands her to go back to her village where she converts many Samaritans. A pattern he used often with his disciples.
* It is a woman who anoints Jesus; In John 12, Mary foresees what is to come and carries out a priestly act, anointing Jesus to prepare him for death.
* The Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 challenges Jesus, and her words cause him to change his mind.

Women were fully a part of Jesus’ ministry, even though they were not specifically named as his disciples. This was of course indicative of the times; women were not leaders of religion or in society, they were mostly silenced and excluded. Jesus moved strides to change this in his 3 years of public ministry, even giving the first post resurrection command to Mary Magdalene.

Jesus was radical in his inclusion of women and St Paul developed this as he travelled, writing to or mentioning church leaders who were women. The ministries of Lydia, Phoebe, Prisca and Junia most notably.

* In Romans 16, Paul commends Phoebe and describes her as a Deacon.
* Later in Romans 16, Paul addresses Prisca as a leader who appears to have planted churches. She also taught Apollos the apostle, suggesting she herself was an apostle.

Beyond Jesus’ death, Christian thinking was continually developing in many areas. We read in Paul’s letters how he was grappling with what Jesus’ death and resurrection meant for him as a Jew and for non Jews. He debated whether non Jewish men, the gentiles, should be circumcised before they came for baptism.

Careful prayer and discernment led to the understanding that baptism was for all; everyone could be baptised into Christ equally and without prerequisites. Paul writes in Galatians 5, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” The fruit of the Spirit was for all people. If Paul hadn’t come to this conclusion, then Christianity would have remained a sect of the Jewish faith, and you and I may never have heard of the saving power of Jesus Christ.

Once the issue of circumcision had been erased, a Jewish or gentile convert to the Christian faith had exactly the same opportunity to lead in the Church. Jesus chose 12 men, but he also chose 12 Jews. Since gentiles were now being given leadership roles, Christian leaders were no longer chosen for their faith as had been the case for the original 12. Apollos, a gentile, was possibly the first non Jewish apostle.

More recently, the Church has been grappling with Paul’s claim that there is no longer male and female. What does it mean for the Church to equalise the status of men and women as leaders? Just as you are doing in this place. I believe we can use Paul’s deliberation to consider this matter.

Just like with the Jew and gentiles conundrum, if women and men are baptised into Christ, then they are equally in Christ. If Christ died for humanity, indeed the whole of creation, then the salvation of women is equal to that of the salvation of men. The arguments *against* this would have to mean that non Jewish, uncircumcised men would also be excluded from salvation. If men and women are equal in Christ, then it must follow that each receive the same gifting. As baptised, saved Christian people, each of us is filled with the Spirit and given gifts with which to serve, lead and teach.

Through the grace of God, each of us have been brought together as the body of Christ. It follows therefore that women and men can be priests, just as non Jewish men are priests.

However, I recognise that there is a line of thinking which suggests a priest must be a man in order to see the image of Christ, most especially at the Eucharist – there may be a question which asks, how can you see the image of Christ through the body of a woman? Well, if that is the case we must ask, how can we see Jesus the Jew, Jesus the 30 year old man, Jesus the Nazarene through anyone? It is through the grace of God that we encounter Jesus – a woman, who is as equally redeemed as a man, can be a representative of Christ at the altar.

By including women at the altar, the Church is not going against Catholic tradition. Far from it. It is including women within this tradition, recognising that men and women are created equally in the image of God and offering that image in all forms of ministry so as to include the whole of humanity.

Jesus came as a man because being a woman would have formed barriers and made his mission too complicated. Women were seen as inferior to men; they weren’t allowed to speak in a court of law, they could not choose who they married. In fact, their purpose was to serve men. How could Jesus minister as a woman? Jesus acknowledged this, yet still included women in his ministry. It’s important therefore that we begin to see Jesus as a human being and not as a man, thus acknowledging his humanity above his masculinity.

Throughout Christian history, women have continued to be silenced, often tortured or killed for attempting to interpret scripture. However, we do have the wonderful tradition of some saints such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila – all of whom have left us with beautiful liturgy, songs and creative ways of being Christian leaders.

Scripture and tradition offer us a valuable resource but we now need to turn our hearts and minds to this parish. How is it in our hearts and our minds that God calls us as witnesses to the love and joy of the Kingdom in this place, at this time? Which values is God asking us to hold onto? Which values is God asking us to move away from? How is it that we can best be the Christian people in this community, whilst still maintaining the respect of all that has been in this parish throughout the centuries.

There is much to consider. But if you do choose to petition then there are a few things which will need to be thought through carefully…

1. How might it feel to not be able to invite Bishop *N* (or indeed Archdeacon *N*) to preside at your altar?
2. How might you support a woman in your parish who believes God is calling her to the priesthood?
3. How might you preach the love and inclusiveness of God to a congregation who don’t all share this particular theological conviction?
4. And most importantly… How might you engage with your community when there will be many women leaders in all different contexts?

Whichever path you choose, there will be painful and practical decisions to make. Whatever you decide, as aDiocese, we are committed to supporting you, giving you advice and encouragement as far as we are able.

The Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways. God uses each and every one of us for the purpose of building the Kingdom. We therefore need to listen to all voices to ensure God is heard fully. I will pray as you discern and am willing to be a greater part of this discernment should it be helpful.

May you each know the blessings of God as you walk this path.

Amen.