

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 13th March 2022

Away back in 1978, in my first year as a parish minister, I discovered very quickly indeed that my Kirk Session in Neilston was a bastion of male chauvinism. All of the 35 elders were male, and even though the General Assembly had passed legislation to permit females to be ordained to the Eldership in 1966, the Kirk Session in that historic church did not feel that it was quite in keeping with the ethos of this particular Congregation.

On a Communion Sunday, as we gathered in the Session Room to constitute before the worship began, the smell of moth balls was quite overpowering! At that time, my Elders still wore their tail coats and pin stripe trousers and any young men who were elected to serve on the Session either had to go out and buy this formal attire or hire it for the day!

In the impetuosity of youth, at one of my first Kirk Session meetings, I was bold enough to suggest that perhaps it was time for us to think of choosing a few more new members to serve as Elders and it might be a very forward looking idea to consider ladies to be elected. There were lots of excellent ladies in the congregation – attending faithfully Sunday by Sunday, singing in the Choir, teaching in Sunday School, supporting the Guild and doing a hundred and one jobs behind the scenes. But the Eldership of the Kirk was being denied them.

I can still see the looks that came in my direction that night! Some complexions turned puce and a few looked as if they might have apoplexy on the spot. After what was only a minute or so, though it seemed like an eternity, one of my Senior Elders, one of several farmers on the Session, glowered at me, and said, “Moderator, over my dead body!”

Well, I never managed to persuade those office-bearers during my Ministry to change that aspect of their common life, but my successor had far more success in that regard, and several excellent ladies in the congregation were elected to the highest office in the church – and not before time! And what an asset they were, and many of them still are!

I can remember my dear friend, the late Revd Effie Campbell, ordained to the Ministry when she was 58 years of age, telling me that in the early years she met with hostility and prejudice in many areas of our Church’s life, but, Effie, in her own inimitable way, soon won the doubters and the sceptics round, and exercised a wonderfully vibrant Ministry for 12 years in the town of Cumnock, where she was greatly loved until her retirement, aged 70.

There are still congregations in Scotland who would never contemplate having a woman in their pulpit as, in their interpretation of Scripture, it is not a woman’s place to be a leader in the life of a congregation. For those churches, women are to keep silent in church and not take authority, so the ladies are quite simply left to make the tea and bake the cakes! That is their role. Heaven forbid that any of them might consider being able to speak a word of Jesus!

It still takes the Church a long time to catch up with society!

I am writing these few words on International Women’s Day, the 8th March every year, a date in the calendar that is marked with events around the world, celebrating the cultural, political, social and economic achievements of women. The theme this year is “Gender equality today for a sustainable

tomorrow,” looking to highlight around the globe the contribution of women and girls who participate in their communities, promoting climate change adaptation, in order to build a more sustainable future for everyone.

All of us can name women who have been very strong influences in our own lives – our mothers and grandmothers, school teachers, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders and a host more and we can give thanks for the blessings which their hard work and sacrifices and love secured for us.

There are thousands and thousands of women, who throughout the years, either alone, or shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk, have worked and struggled to provide the best possible lives for themselves and their families, and, through these, for the human community itself.

I had a wry smile to myself when the Church of England was getting itself into a quandary a few years ago at the time it was debating to proceed with the consecration of women as bishops. When the decision was made in favour, there was a lot of pain and rejoicing, but the gifts and the graces which these women have brought to that extremely important pastoral role have been phenomenal.

Throughout His earthly Ministry, Jesus always gave a central place to women, in a society and culture where females were regarded as being little more than possessions. Indeed, there was a Jewish prayer at the time which said, “O God, I give you thanks that you have not made me a woman.”!

Remember that incident in the Gospels where Jesus and His disciples had been travelling and they stopped by a well in the mounting heat of the day. The disciples went off to the town to buy food, and Jesus encountered that unnamed woman, and there is a whole chapter devoted to her. That woman is the very first evangelist.

Andrew brings his brother, Peter, a wee boy, and some Greeks to Jesus, for which he is made patron saint of Scotland and Russia and Greece. That woman at the well brought a whole village to Jesus, but no nation has so honoured her.

It’s women who regularly provide food and lodgings for Jesus and His male companions.

It is the women who followed Him, who accompany His body to the grave.

It is a woman who first sees Him after the Resurrection.

There is no other male figure in world history who has so clearly engaged with, depended on and encouraged women.

Jesus showed us very forcibly that men and women stand as equals before God, both bearing the image of God Himself.

As long as inequities and discrimination remain so commonplace in the world; as long as women and girls are valued less in their societies and cultures and religions; as long as they are underpaid, unschooled, exploited, subjected to violence both within and out with their homes, the potential of the human family to create a peaceful and prosperous world will never be realised and Christ’s Kingdom will not come on earth.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister