

# Through Women's Eyes

Sermon preached by Adrian D. van Breda  
at St Martin's Church on 9 August 2009 (Women's Day)

I learned early on in life that this world was a hard place for women. In standard six, a friend of mine told me that she had been molested by her Sunday School teacher. I was only about 13, and this was quite a challenge for me. We talked about it often. I remember coming home to my mother, who was a marriage counsellor, and saying how horrible it was and how much it hurt and what could I say to her. My friend found it very hard to trust or get close to anyone – she was always on her guard.

I studied social work at UCT after school, and my very first practical placement, in second year, when I was 20, was in the emergency unit of Groote Schuur Hospital. Most of my clients were women who were beaten by their husbands. I remember one of my cases particularly well, because I saw her only once. Her body was so bruised – every visible part of her, her face, neck, hands and arms and legs were covered in deep bruises that had built up over years. She was barely recognisable. Her jaw had been shattered and wired several times, broken ribs, broken arms, hands, legs. Just unimaginable battering.

I was so outraged, so young and angry and evangelical. I insisted that we go to lay a charge against her husband, that this was unacceptable, that she deserved better. Well, I never saw her again. She had no way out, she was trapped, she went back to what she knew. It was very hard. Through all of these experiences I learned that women experience suffering in this world in a way that most men cannot grasp.

The Church, which should be a place of refuge for those who suffer and are oppressed, has unfortunately not helped. We have added insult to injury. Our previous church was filled with wonderful people who love Jesus deeply, who have a high regard for Scripture and who are passionate about living out their faith. That is where I met Jesus and became a Christian, it's where I grew up in the faith. But they believe that women are not allowed to hold positions of authority in the church. They can teach women and children, but not men, because the Bible says that women may not teach or have authority over men. So, there were no woman elders, woman ministers or even woman worship leaders. In fact, Trina was the first woman to help lead worship, but it was under my 'headship', under my authority as her husband. Only my name appeared on the leaders roster. Through this women learned that they were somehow not quite adequate, not quite complete, not quite good enough, not like men.

I have had many clients over the years who were battered or abused by their husbands. Most of them were told by their pastors or home groups that they must submit to the husbands, as the Bible says. They were told that wives must obey, and they must try to change so that he won't pick on them. They were told that they are suffering with Christ, which is a privilege. It is very sad how the church has actually colluded with violence and injustice towards women.

There are many stories in the Bible that reflect this hard life of women. We've been reading the story of Bathsheba and David recently. Marijke preached a fabulous sermon on it a couple of weeks ago. But, we read that story only from David's perspective – his sin, his confrontation with Nathan, his repentance and reconciliation with God. What about Bathsheba? She is barely mentioned at all. But think of her story. She's at home while her husband is fighting a war, when David spies on her. She's called to the palace where she is effectively raped – he is the king and she has no choice but to submit. She goes home and finds she is pregnant. David murders her husband. She's barely finished mourning when she is forced to marry David. She gives birth to the child of the rape, who dies. Immediately David impregnates her again, and she gives birth to another child, Solomon. What an awful story for a woman – one we seldom reflect on.

Through all of this, I have come to think that it is important for us to reflect on life and on the Bible from the perspective of women. Maybe you have seen the movie National Treasure. They have a treasure map, but it's invisible. But they have a pair of glasses with different coloured

lenses. As you move one lens in front of your eye, you see one set of writing. Another lens brings up another set of writing and so on. In order to see the whole treasure map, you have to look through all of the different lenses – only then do you get the complete picture.

It is the same way with reading the Bible. We have to take on different lenses to make sense of the different parts of the Bible, to get a full and complete picture. Because it is Woman's Day, I want us to think particularly on reading the Bible through women's lenses. Now, more than half of you are women, so you may say, well I am a woman, so of course I read through woman's lenses. But actually, that is not true. The Bible was written by men, from a man's perspective, about men. It has been preached on for centuries by men. Most commentators are men. As a result, we all tend to read the Bible through men's lenses, regardless of whether we are male or female. It takes a special effort, a conscious choice, to read the Bible through women's lenses.

Let me try to give a couple of examples of what I mean from Paul's writings. Now I'm very nervous! Paul has a reputation as a chauvinist, a misogynist. Not very positive about women. But I think that we tend to hook on the passages from his writings that support a patriarchal position – we read Paul through men's eyes.

For example, we all know the passage from Ephesians 5:22-24, about wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. I even see some husbands nudging their wives in the ribs! I can see on your faces, that we all know this passage by heart. We have heard it preached at weddings. It is the passage that is used to pressurise women to submit even to abusive husbands.

But how many of us know this passage from 1 Corinthians 7:2-4? "Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife." Isn't that lovely? This was also written by Paul, by the same guy who wrote the other passage. The first speaks of a hierarchical relationship between wives and husbands =, while the second of a reciprocal, egalitarian relationship involving mutual giving and receiving ||. But while we all know the first reading, most of us have never read the Corinthians passage. Why? Because it does not suit a patriarchal position, and so we read the Bible through men's lenses and this passage becomes invisible.

Let's take another example. 1 Timothy 2:12 says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." Elsewhere Paul says that if a woman has a question, she must be silent and ask her husband in private at home, because it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Cor 14:35). It is these two passages – a merely two or three verses – that my previous church based its practices on, that women could not lead. Because Paul said so.

But when we read Paul's letters, we find numerous references to women in leadership positions. Romans 16 gives a long list of people that Paul sends his greetings to and there are many women in this list. There is Phoebe, who was a Deacon! And Priscilla, who with her husband Aquilla is often mentioned in the New Testament. It's usually written Priscilla and Aquilla, not Aquilla and Priscilla. Like people usually say "Adrian and Trina", not "Trina and Adrian". So the placement of Priscilla's name first is significant. She was a highly regarded leader in the early church. Never, in any of Paul's writings, does he express any discomfort or unease about these women in leadership positions. He never says that these women should really not be leading. He speaks of them always with high regard and respect and warmth.

How then do we make sense of these contradictions within Paul's writings? They certainly do sound contradictory, don't they? Written by the same man in the same Bible. Do we go the route of my previous church and ignore the second set of passages? They only read the passages about wives submitting and women being silent, and didn't look at or notice the other passages. They read through patriarchal lenses. Or do we edit out all the sexist bits in

Paul's letters and say that they are a mistake? Maybe they were added later by someone else or maybe Paul was confused?

The problem is that we can't edit the Bible according to our own needs and interests. I believe that every sentence in the Bible is there for a reason. Nothing is there by accident. We have to grapple with these contradictions and conflicts. We can't just ignore them or remove them or pretend they aren't there. We have to engage with them and discover what they mean for us, what God is saying to us through them.

Let me then suggest the following. Paul lived in a patriarchal society. Men were in charge and women were not. It was not a great time for women to live. Paul himself was, I believe, a patriarch. He did not have a very high regard for women. He had learned and believed that men were in charge. I don't think he thought about women much at all.

When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, when he was blinded, he had a vision of Christ that changed his life for ever. He saw something about God and God's vision for the world that was transformative for Paul. We see this most clearly in his mission to the Gentiles. He was commissioned to reconcile Jews and Gentiles with each other and with God. And in this he is revolutionary and clear and consistent throughout all his writings.

Paul, however, was not called to bring reconciliation between women and men. This was simply not his mission. But the insights he gained about Jews and Gentiles apply equally to women and men, and he had an intuitive sense of this. So the contradictions in his writings point to the fact that Paul was in a process of revising his gender relations. The Holy Spirit was working on him, but Paul did not get there. He is no feminist, no metrosexual, no liberated male!

So there are places in Paul's writings where he reinforces the status quo in the community and in his own thinking about women and men – the passages we are most familiar with. And then there are other places where Paul seems to look down the road that God opened up before him. And he has glimpses of what it looks like down the other end of that road. Paul himself did not walk down that road – no more than a few steps perhaps – but he had hints of the vision of where that road led.

For example, in Galatians 3:28 he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Isn't that remarkable? Paul had an intuitive understanding, though not fully worked out, that in Christ all the demographics that are so important to us will simply cease to exist or cease to matter. We become one. Our gender, our race, our intelligence, our sexual orientation, our age, our ability, our weight, our socioeconomic status – all of these will disappear in Christ. We are all one, all loved, all reconciled, all redeemed.

Paul articulates this most brilliantly in Ephesians 1:10, which is one of my favourite passages because he says that it is the mystery of God's will revealed to us. Wouldn't you love to know what God's will is? It is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." This is the ministry of reconciliation, that we are all one under Christ. There is no wives submitting to husbands, no women being silent while men speak, no domestic violence or rape or oppression or exclusion or silencing of women. NO! We are all reconciled, equally and beloved, in Christ. The image of God, which is stamped equally and indelibly on every one of us, is cherished and the intrinsic worth and dignity and beauty of all people is celebrated!

So. What do we do with all of this? Where do we go from here? Let me suggest three things that we can do in response.

Firstly, we can choose to read the Bible through lenses other than our own. Through women's lenses. When we read, we can ask, "How would a battered woman read this? How would a rape survivor read this? How would a woman who has been told all her life that she is not sufficient, not adequate, not okay read this?" Perhaps then we will see new things and understand things differently.

Secondly, we can look into ourselves, to see the ways in which we view the world and the relationship between women and men. Maybe we have been taught to view women in particular ways, to view ourselves in particular ways. Perhaps these things need to change. Perhaps we need to challenge ourselves.

And thirdly, as representatives of the Church, of this church St Martins, as Christians, let us not perpetuate the oppression and subordination of women. Let it not be said of us that we support patriarchy and violence, that we think less of women because they are women. Let it rather be said through our behaviour, that we affirm the intrinsic dignity and beauty of every person. That we stand up for human rights for all, women and men, and that we speak out against any form of violence and oppression against women. Because this is what Christ came to reveal to us all.

Amen.