

Is the C of E Becoming Feminised?

Feminised Church? Well, Not As such ...

Often today, in discussions of the apparent difficulties with evangelising to men, there comes the suggestion that the problem with today's church is that it is too *feminised* - in this context, the idea of men coming to know, and *love* Jesus, can be fraught (and this alleged feminisation may have come about following the introduction of female clergy). I wonder a lot about this; it raises the question of what exactly we mean by *feminine* (and *masculine*), and - if female leadership is significant - about the mode of its influence on the church.

Of course, the exact nature of feminine and masculine are questions which have relevance beyond consideration of the church and Christianity. It seems to me that these two exist separately from both the gender of male and female; if I am right, it is meaningful to talk about the presence of these qualities, interchangeably, in men and women. This, I fancy, is a well accepted position, and thus we have talk of men "discovering their feminine side", and suchlike; and even the vaguely-close observer of people around him becomes conscious of the masculine and feminine trait present in women and men - and (for the self-perceptive) in one's own nature. So my guess is that the church might have had a feminine aspect before women clergy came on the scene, and that the women clergy have not only brought their femininity with them. Indeed, it is very interesting to look at situations in which, in recent years, women have become prominent where they never were before, not only the church, but businesses, academic organisations and the media (one also hears the idea that the BBC has become "too feminised").

Do women principally bring femininity? One revealing indicator - suggesting that they do not - is language. Previously, organisations had managers, actors and priests; but when women came to prominence in them, they did not bring feminine labels (as we might have expected) but took over the existing labels; but manager, actor and priest are not *neutral* terms, they are *masculine* terms, and the moment I heard that the newly-accepted female clergy were not to be known by that honourable term *priestess*, I began to feel uneasy.

Only much later have I realised exactly why: it was not because of their presence in the sanctuary, but because of their assimilation to a male role without truly re-creating it as a female role; perhaps they were not bringing *enough* femininity (I wonder what female *occultist* sacerdotal officiants call themselves, these days?). In the later-1970s, I attended a church in south London where the Rev. Geoffrey Kirk was curate. I remember him giving a sermon on the text (the *My Fair Lady* song popularised by Rex Harrison) “Just why can’t a woman be more like a man?”; Fr. Kirk went on to prominence in the Forward in Faith movement, defending the role of male-only priesthood in the Church of England; perhaps some of the women (clergy) were trying too hard.

In the past, women of drama were quite happy to be called *actresses*. Only today – the result, surely, of “feminist” political correctness – do they seem to need a male label; quite how this enhances and furthers the standing of women in the theatre I fail to see.

The quality or trait of femininity that is present in all of us, therefore, I do not see as being necessarily present more in the church than it used to be (or less), nor in our perception of the object of the church’s attention; while God chose to reveal himself by human analogy as male, and also genderless (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), all divinity is ultimately beyond gender; and love of Jesus is beyond love of a male also.