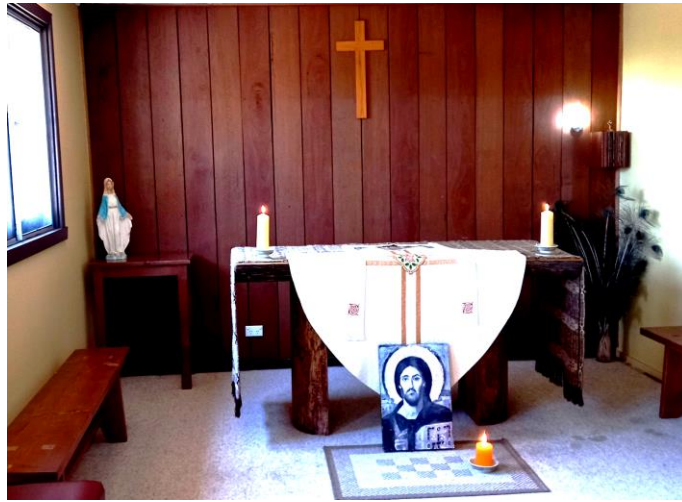


# *The Place of Women in the Church*



In Genesis 1:27, we read that God created humankind: "...in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Neither men nor women are described as superior to the other. In hospital recently, I observed that there were both male and female nurses, no longer just women as in the distant past. Both nursed in a caring manner but sometimes in different ways. When we consider the role of an ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Australia, I see nothing to limit it to men, but an advantage to have both women and men responding to this call from God.

For the birth of Jesus as a human being in our world to take place, a woman was needed who would respond positively to God (Luke 1:38). Mary was the woman who accepted the role God planned for her, risking the loss of her good reputation and being rejected by her betrothed, Joseph.

The fact that Jesus appointed men to be apostles, was probably, I suggest, influenced by and reflecting the cultural environment of 1st century Jewish life. This action of Jesus could be why Christians continued for many years to restrict the ordination to the priesthood to men. Interestingly, after Judas died, the criteria cited in Acts 1:21-22 for his replacement as an apostle, was for a man who was present with the other apostles during all of Jesus' ministry and so was a witness to his resurrection.

In Luke 8:1-3, the twelve apostles are described as being with Jesus as he was "proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God". With the

men, we are told, were some women who had been healed by Jesus. These women not only supported the apostles financially and heard Jesus' good news, but were also followers who witnessed Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

The story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 depicts Martha as behaving culturally correct as a woman, welcoming Jesus into her house by serving him, possibly with refreshments. We are told that Martha complained to Jesus because her sister Mary was not helping her. Contrary to expectation, Jesus vindicated Mary's decision to sit, listen and welcome him as a prophet.

Later, in John 11, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary became ill. Lazarus died, and Jesus set out to Bethany in Judea to see him. In John 11:25-27, Martha met Jesus on the way, and he told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live... Do you believe this?" Martha's powerful reply indicated a growth in her faith in Jesus since their earlier encounter. She said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

The accounts of Jesus' death in all four gospels, verify that the women disciples were present, and in three gospels that they were also at his burial. In John 19:27, the disciple whom Jesus loved is mentioned at the cross, but he obeys Jesus and takes Jesus' mother home with him.

Again in all four gospels, the descriptions of the resurrection of Jesus, confirm that women, particularly Mary Magdalene (John 20:16-18), went to the tomb on the first day of the week. There they were the first people to hear from an angel that Jesus had risen, and to see and speak to their risen Lord. They later told the apostles, but were not believed.

On the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-4, the disciples were gathered together and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was soon shared with 3,000 others who repented and were baptised. This number surely included both men and women. Certainly, in Romans 16:1-4, Paul indicated that women were fully involved in the work of the church when he commended Phoebe, describing her as a minister of the church at Cenchreae, possibly a deacon, and sent greetings to his fellow workers Prisca and Aquila who had a church in their house at Ephesus.

Since the first century, many other women, although not ordained to the priesthood, are also remembered as having made important contributions to the work of the church. These include Clare of Assisi, Julian of Norwich and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Although in the past only men were ordained as priests in the Anglican Church, now women are also being ordained. In Australia this began in 1992. In 1993 the first women were ordained priests in Grafton Diocese, and this year on December 2nd we are celebrating 30 years since this event. We can only rejoice and give thanks for the many women who are priests in our diocese and elsewhere in Australia, and all those since 2008 who have also been consecrated bishops in the Anglican Church of Australia.

I believe that having both men and women as members, priests and bishops in the church, better reflects the truth and wholeness of the church's identity as the body of Christ at work in the world today.

*Sister Helen CSC  
December 2023*