

International Women's Day

A few weeks ago I watched a very interesting, though in some ways disturbing, television programme about women composers. For centuries women were allowed to sing and later play the piano but composing was considered something that men did. Many women who did compose so often saw their ambitions thwarted. They were discouraged and were often not able to achieve their full potential. Even in the twentieth century they still faced difficulties.

Ironically the woman who was able to flourish most was a nun who lived in the twelfth century: Hildegard of Bingen. Had she lived solely outside the confines of her convent she would have been very limited in what she might be able to achieve. Within the convent of which she became abbess she had much greater freedom and rein.

In recent years she has become best known for the music she composed, which has a particularly haunting and inspiring character. Yet she also wrote works of visionary theology, as well as a natural history and a medical compendium. She was much sought after for advice and, something extremely unusual at the time for a woman, went on four preaching tours throughout Germany. Early on she was considered a saint, but not until 2012 was she officially proclaimed a Doctor of the Church, one of the few women to be given that title. She was a truly remarkable woman who was able to transcend the limitations imposed in her day.

Today is International Women's Day. This year's theme focusses on creating a more gender-balanced world. The Day is also an opportunity to raise awareness against bias and to celebrate women's achievement. Of course this would not be necessary were it not for the challenges and prejudice women still face in our world today.

Despite the example of Hildegard and others the Church has been slow to catch up. It is only twenty-five years ago that the first women were ordained priest in the Church of England, followed by the first bishop as recently as 2015. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches still do not admit women to any form of ordained ministry.

When we look at the Bible we see a number of remarkable women who stand out in the otherwise strongly patriarchal society in which they lived. And it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus very much treated men and women equally.

Admittedly St Paul gives out mixed messages. Some of his statements about the role of women in the Church clearly need to be seen in context, and a context which we have largely lost. And yet he is also able to make the powerful assertion we heard in our Bible reading just now that there is no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3.23-29). That passage, which we also heard last week, is a key one for understanding the Good News of God's love in Christ and for all concerned for peace and reconciliation in our world today.

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8 March 2019