

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
18th April 2010
Easter III

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."
(Isaiah 66:13)

Although today's Gospel lesson provides great opportunities for preaching – the call of Jesus to the disgruntled disciples, the entreaty of Jesus to Peter, "Feed my sheep," and that wacky guy putting on his clothes *before* jumping into the water (did you catch that!?) – although there's much to reflect upon and talk about, something happened to me last Sunday that I really want to offer you as a base for conversation and prayer.

You may have noticed that during the Season of Easter we are using Eucharistic Prayer D, a longer and much older prayer than we usually use. During last Sunday's Eucharist, I *said* the prayer rather than chanting it – and perhaps because this was a slower, more intentional way of offering the prayer to you and to God I really attended a bit more to the words.

When I chant the prayer using what is called the "Mozarabic Tone," dating from 16th Century Spain, I am focused on singing it right. It's not an easy chant, but I must admit that it moves me into a state of joyful reverence. But because I'm paying so much attention to the chant itself, perhaps I'm neglecting to pay *real* attention to the words.

The Eucharistic Prayer itself has the oldest pedigree in our Book of Common Prayer – it is taken from the prayers of St. Basil, from the fourth century. In its substance, it is authorized among more Christians than any other Eucharistic prayers, and therefore has an ecumenical significance as well. You might notice that its structure – praise, remembrance, thanksgiving, institution, blessing – is roughly the same as the other prayers we use in the Episcopal Church. A major difference is that the prayers of the people are incorporated into the prayer – Notice later when Nancy offers prayers within the body of the text. For me, this is a significant shift – it incorporates our prayers for the church, the sick, and those in trouble into our prayer of thanksgiving for God's wondrous deeds.

Now you might think, correctly, that this is all fairly academic. So I won't give you any more seminary notes.

What I want to talk about are the words themselves. Because that's what struck me last Sunday.

What struck me, quite suddenly, was how very patriarchal, how very *male* this prayer is. "Father" this and "Father" that and "Father" every which way. The male Holy Spirit as the source of the incarnation, Mary the vehicle. "Patriarchs," no matriarchs (as if Sarah, wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac, only incidental as the source of Israel). The women – Mary, Sarah, and a whole host of others, are sorely neglected.

I don't have a problem with referring to God as Father. Not really. But for some, it conjures up for one thing some rather grouchy old white guy with a beard, or perhaps a benevolent grandpa – and for others, with their own fathers as analogy, it can be off-putting or even frightening, bringing up sad memories of ill-treatment or emotional absence. That's not the sort of God – the loving, creative, energetic God – that we worship.

And so I'd like to explore for a few minutes the question of gender and God. Before you rush off to e-mail the Bishop, I'll warn you that I'm not going to say anything heretical – this will be an exploration and an invitation. For if we are to experience a closer relationship with the Divine, we need to understand that while one aspect of the Holy Trinity might invite me, it is another aspect of the Trinity which might invite you – and yet another which might invite *you*. In other words, we are all on a journey – and perhaps that journey can have fewer roadblocks if we simply accept the idea that images are just that: small icons through which we travel in our hearts with an ever-increasing nearness to God – evermore near, yet always not quite there.

It seems to me that if we limit our understanding of God to God's "maleness," we are already putting up a roadblock for *someone* – and so my search for the feminine Divine, along with the masculine Divine, and along with the totally gender-less yet all-gendered Divine I hope helps us get around those roadblocks.

We each have our own stories of family, and we each have our own experience of God. If we've had a troubled relationship with our father, what would it feel like to have a relationship with God our holy Mother? Is it weird? Or might it be wonderful? Even among those who think they have survived their childhood unscathed, many think of a father as colder and sterner than a mother and this unconsciously affects their feelings for God.

Think of some of the aspects of God that we revere: God the creator, God the comforter (as in the Isaiah passage I quoted earlier), God the caregiver, God the peacemaker, God the bearer of pain and the bearer of our world. Unfortunately for us guys, in Western society, these have been traditionally the role of *women*. Not exclusively, perhaps, but in general.

And if we ascribe these aspects to God, well, then, aren't we on a slippery slope toward a feminine God? God our Mother?

But even more – if we limit ourselves to God the Father, then it's just one more box we're trying to put God in: God who's on our side, God who judges, God the Christian, God the Episcopalian – good grief. Any image we can conjure up – God the old man on a throne, God the hurler of thunderbolts, God the divine puppeteer – any image we can conjure up, any image ever painted or sculpted or poetically described is so very limited. Any aspect of God is just that: an aspect; a portion; a limited vision. Because God doesn't have *our* aspects, we have the aspects of God. And we see through the glass darkly.

So we must open ourselves to a God who is so vast and so indescribable that gender just doesn't count. "Is God a man?" is about as useless as "How old is God?"

A better way, I suggest, is to begin to imagine a God who transcends all gender - who is neither male nor female but is both and beyond.

And here's something else... If the word "God" embraces the three persons of the Holy Trinity, does it make sense that God would embrace all genders and genderless-ness as well? I mean, if we ascribe certain feminine qualities to Holy Wisdom, and if we can certainly say that Jesus is the Son, well, what's left for the third person? I mean, one female plus one male - don't we need one which is neither and both?

Now again - I am not preaching heresy. There are old Christian traditions of the feminine Divine - Dame Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, ancient references to God our Mother, Christ our Mother, non-Biblical archaeological finds referring to Christ our Mother, God our Mother. There are Scripture references implying a sense of motherhood and nurture to God. Maybe they were blotted out by early church fathers?

For now, I'm willing to let go of this. I'm willing to admit that the Bible was written by men at a certain time in certain cultures which were, by and large, patriarchal. And so the image of God the Father was appropriate and, well, it just worked. But as we approach a day when men and women, fathers and mothers, will be more equally respected, we may need to revisit such a male-dominated theology - even within a primarily male-dominated church.

For now, I'm willing to let go, and to simply sit in the presence of the Divine. Not really worrying about gender and God too much, but also not forgetting it completely. I need to pray on this, and to *listen for the one who is left out*.

Because I believe that in listening for the one who is left out I will be better able to draw her in - and to see our Mother in all creation and all salvation.

Thanks be to God.