

## Bishops With(out) Breasts

Now before everyone starts having a go at the priests we should remember that the recent failure to pass legislation allowing the election of women priests to the episcopate was the fault (that's right, fault) not of priests and bishops but of the laity, the non-ordained who sit in the pews. The measure was supported by sizable majorities in two of the three houses in the General Synod, the House of Bishops and the House of Clergy, but failed to pass in the House of Laity. For the measure to pass it had to garner support in all three houses. After years of deliberation and campaigning, even after the epoch defining Vicar of Dibley, the Church's congregations just couldn't stomach breasts in a mitre (unless of course those breasts are a man's).



(Photo: [The Times](#))

The issues surrounding the controversy of women bishops are fairly simple. Jesus was a man, he had all male disciples, he entrusted the church to men and men were the first bishops. So it's also Jesus's fault. Oh, and St. Paul's: he didn't want women prophesying or even speaking in church. What's weird is that the CofE ordained its first female priest on 5th November 1994 after having debated the issue since 1966 but can't make the leap to elect them to positions of ecclesiastical power.

It might seem an obvious point considering that half the world's population is female, but women have always been at the heart of the Christian tradition. Let's start with Mary, the Mother of God; she was a

woman, right? Mary brought, through her woman's womb, the saviour of mankind into the world. She was chosen by God to bear and raise his son. She is worshipped in Catholicism (there is even a movement in Rome to acknowledge Mary as a "co-redemptrix" with Christ, i.e. she offers a route to salvation in her own right). In the Catholic wing of the CofE Mary is prayed to, petitioned and worshipped. Hail Mary *full of grace the Lord is with you*. You can't get a better recommendation than that. So, a woman was good enough to give birth to Jesus, to feed him and change his shitty nappies, to witness his execution by crucifixion, but not to lead his followers in a position of authority. Without Mary, without a woman, there would be no Jesus, no church and no salvation. Women are doing pretty well so far.

Like I said, Jesus chose male disciples. But that's not to say he didn't 'fraternize' with women. Mary Magdalene was pretty important to Jesus. So important that in the 'gnostic' Gospel of Mary, a second century text not included in the New Testament, Jesus' disciple Levi says to Peter, 'if the Saviour made her worthy, *who are you then to reject her?* Certainly the Saviour knows her very well. That is why *he loved her more than us* [male disciples]' [1]. But she was a hooker so she doesn't count. Well, not quite. There is a widely accepted scholarly opinion that Mary M was not a prostitute but was labelled one by the early, male dominated church. And so what if she was a prostitute? She loved Jesus; we can't hold anything against all womankind because of the supposed lifestyle of a few. If that was the case then men, possibly the most destructive force in history, wouldn't be allowed to do *anything*.

Considering the first century view of women (it wasn't great), it was women, not men, who were the first to find Jesus's tomb empty after his crucifixion. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke it was women to whom Jesus first revealed himself as the risen and glorified Christ. We must trust the testimonies of these women. It is perhaps even more shocking if we consider the witness or testimony of women was considered invalid in Jewish Law. However, as first-time witnesses it was women who were the first post-Easter Christians, the first believers in a resurrected Christ. There's evidence, despite two thousand years of ecclesiastical misogyny, of Old and New Testament time female prophets (I really like the word 'prophetess'), of women ministering in the early church (and by early church I don't mean a time of cathedrals and popes but the time of Christians gathering in one another's homes under the threat of persecution and death). It was once the Church became more organized, doctrinal and patronized by ruling powers that the inevitable happened: the men took over.

Although I've tried to point out where women have been involved in the Christian witness we all know why women did not ascend to positions of church power in history or in our own times and it's down to sexism. Now, I'm not particularly educated in feminism, but hopefully I'm not an idiot and can reasonably assert that women have been treated badly in the Church because women have been treated badly in most areas of life, for like, ever. Why would women in the Church have been treated any differently than women in the home, household or workplace? It's only in recent history that women attained the rights to vote; to procreative autonomy and to equal pay (the latter two are still not universal). If women have only recently

been granted such rights in predominantly democratic secular societies is it not surprising that they are yet to be granted positions of power in a male dominated Church. Years of deliberation about women bishops in the CofE might seem like a long time but in the history of women's rights it is hardly any time at all.



(Photo: [The Telegraph](#))

So what's the big deal? Why did the priests want women bishops but the average church goer just couldn't face it? It might be a little presumptuous but perhaps not unreasonable to assume that those who sit in the House of Laity, those that opposed the measure, aren't going to be young, liberal reformers. People like me: late twenties, theologically educated and liberal see no real practical or theological distinction between male and female bishops. It's like CDs. Everyone born in the iPod age can't imagine a time when you got the bus to town on a Saturday and bought a CD single. That is something of the past. It's the same with female priests. I can't remember a time when I was involved in the church and haven't been in contact with or ministered by a female priest. To encounter a female bishop would, to me at least, feel no different. I would feel no theological unease, no crisis of conscience as the traditionalists like to call it. If anything I'd feel a crisis of conscience if I felt a crisis of conscience.

During the media's coverage of the recent Synod I found one woman's opinions particularly insulting. She sat on BBC news and opposed the measure to elect women bishops. She claimed that it was theologically unacceptable, but consoled those who may wish to be bishops by saying women had other gifts that they can offer the Church. She didn't elaborate on what exactly these gifts may be but I assumed she meant flower

arranging and cake baking. And whilst we're on the subject of stereotypes, surely the traditional virtues of women: nurturing, emotionally insightful, understanding (and most importantly multi-tasking), are more than enough reason to elect women to the episcopate.

It looks like it'll take a little longer than hoped but there will be women bishops and at some point a female Archbishop of Canterbury. Having women in such positions doesn't mean that they will do the job any better than men but they deserve the chance to have a go. I'm fairly sure that Jesus wouldn't mind, so who are his worshippers to refuse?

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[1] Italics mine

Note: this article was published before the vote to allow women into the episcopate of the Church of  
England