

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> July 2022**  
**Fifth Sunday after Trinity**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Genesis 18: 1-10a**  
**NT: Colossians 1: 15-28**  
**G: Luke 10: 38-42**

I recently re-read Margaret Atwood's book, *The Handmaid's Tale*. If you've read it yourself, or seen the recent TV adaptation, you'll know it is about a fictional dystopian society called Gilead, located in North America. Gilead follows an extreme and oppressive form of biblical fundamentalism. Enemies of the state – Catholics, Jews, Baptists, Quakers, homosexuals, doctors who perform abortions (the list goes on) – are put to death.

In Gilead, women are essentially property. They are not allowed to work or hold any authority over men outside the domestic sphere. And thanks to widespread infertility, many younger women are conscripted as Handmaids: forced to try and bear the children of Gilead's ruling elite, whose own wives cannot conceive.

It is a truly disturbing book, in which the violence inherent in political fundamentalism is exposed. That violence expresses itself especially in attempts to control the bodies and minds of women. Given what we are witnessing in our day – in Afghanistan, across the Atlantic - Atwood's story remains tragically relevant and prophetic.

Although the focus in the book is on the Handmaids, we also find other categories of women pressed into service. One of these is the Marthas, who do the domestic work for the ruling elite. They cook, clean and serve. Their title obviously comes from the passage in Luke's gospel we just heard. Jesus visits the sisters Mary and Martha. In John's gospel, the sisters appear with their brother Lazarus, but here no male relative is mentioned.

In many ways, Martha seems an admirable character. She welcomes Jesus to her home. She seems to be a woman of property and standing, but she risks her reputation to invite in this strange wandering preacher. She not only opens her door, but shows practical hospitality, rushing around making sure things are right for her guest.

The first thing to notice is that the gospel character is nothing like the Marthas of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Our Martha is independent. She is not forced into servitude, but willingly offers her home.

So, it's not surprising that readers feel Martha is hard done to in this story. She wants her sister to get off her backside and help, but instead she receives a rebuke from Jesus. Why? Why can her sister just sit at his feet while she does all the work? Who does this man think he is?

To answer this, we need to remember the context of this story. What is happening is something highly subversive. In Jesus' day, women could not become rabbis or study with them. They could not serve as priests or Levites in the Temple. They would not be found among the scribes and lawyers; whose expertise was in the way of the Law. Generally, they were not supposed to have a public religious role.

However, reality is never as simple as those who set the rules like to think. There clearly were women who had independent means and who were acknowledged as important founders of, or contributors to, synagogues. Luke tells us of a group of women who actively supported Jesus' ministry out of their own resources. So, there were clearly women pushing back against the expectation that they should be seen and not heard, that they should keep themselves to the sphere of home and family.

In our gospel, Jesus affirms this subversive movement of women. Mary acts as a student: someone leaning about the law, the way and presence of God, for herself. Where formal education was often not extended to girls, simply sitting and learning becomes a moment of transformation.

None of this is a rejection of Martha's hospitality. Her welcome opens the space in which such an encounter can take place. Her practical generosity is essential: no movement, no ministry survives only on fresh air and good will.

And yet, Mary 'chooses the better part' because she takes a further step. She is not just handing round the glasses, she is drinking her fill. She is part of the feast, not just its servant. She is taking the time to learn, to think, to question. She is prepared to stop and to step out of her expected role.

This is what Martha needs to appreciate – not that her service is somehow wrong, but that she is not present to the moment of God's presence. Hospitality must allow a genuine encounter with the other. She is still too caught up in her social role and what she thinks ought to be done. Mary, on the other hand, is prepared to let God's nearness re-draw the limits of her world. She sets at nothing expectations of gender roles, because she has noticed what really matters. That's what no fundamentalism can stand. It is why the kingdom of God and fundamentalism will always be at odds. The kingdom does not traffic in violent repression and control, or in lives diminished by conformity.

In this light, it's instructive to compare the Mary from today's reading to two others in the gospels.

The first is Mary Magdalene. According to Luke, she is one of the women, healed by Jesus, who provides for his ministry. Some writings outside the New Testament affirm the closeness of her friendship with Jesus. She is at the cross and is one of the women who first find the empty tomb. In John's gospel, it is to her that the risen Jesus first appears. His charge to her to go and tell the other disciples what she had seen led to her great title in Christian tradition: she is the apostle to the apostles.

It is only in later centuries that she is identified as a prostitute, something the NT never does – and all the lurid male imagination of 'a fallen woman raised up by a male hero' kicks into play. She is sexualised, as her closeness to Jesus has been sexualised, because the idea of a woman who is as important, if not more important, than the twelve apostles seems so shocking. Mary Magdalene does not fit the narrative of male control and headship. But it is precisely for that reason that her being and witness needs to be celebrated.

The second Mary I want to turn to is Our Lady: Mary, the mother of God. She is obviously the most important woman in the Christian faith, the recipient of devotion and prayer for

centuries. But she is also often written off as the ultimate symbol of female submission. As a virgin mother, she is supposed to be an impossible ideal of purity for real women.

Clearly, the church has at times portrayed her as the essence of passive, meek femininity. But this is a travesty. Mary is not some timid maiden impregnated by a male God. She is presented in Luke's gospels as the one who questions the angel, whose 'yes' is absolutely essential to the incarnation. If she is 'handmaid of the Lord' it is not at all the sense of Atwood's book. She is not forced into conformity. She is subject to no man: God is not male and so God does not play the part of a man in Jesus's conception. God, the Holy Spirit is the one who broods over the waters and loves creation into life and being. It is the same Spirit who co-operates with Mary in this new creation, as God assumes and heals our whole humanity - the same Holy Spirit who is often addressed as female in Christian tradition. There is no confirmation of all our human gender norms here.

We need to get out of our heads this idea that Mary is a passive instrument of a male God. It demeans her and distorts God. Instead, we see her acting independently. She needs no man to conceive, and she takes herself off to her cousin Elizabeth seemingly by herself. There she sings that great song of thanks, prophecy and subversion - the Magnificat: in which God casts the mighty from their thrones. Like Mary in our gospel today, she thinks things through: she questions, contemplates, ponders and treasures all that is happening in her heart. She is shown at the cross and with the disciples as they wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In later centuries, Mary was recognised as having an authority and power above all other creatures. But, as with Mary Magdalene, her status was not always allowed to cut through assumptions about the place of women in the church or society. Now, perhaps, it is time to receive her back again, to receive again the inheritance of our faith. By prayer and example, the three Marys help us towards our calling to be filled with God, with the surprising, subversive fullness of God.

Think about these women: Mary, sister of Martha, the student and teacher-in-waiting; Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles; Mary, mother of God, who bears, holds and offers the Word made flesh to the world. They are surely the basis for recognising and celebrating the authority, leadership and priesthood of women in the church. They challenge the way women can still be controlled and objectified today. They challenge the way we perpetuate structures of dominance and control – whether it over women, the poor, trans people (as in our current political discourse, sadly), or even the earth itself and the creatures with whom we share it.

God's love is not limited by our imagination or imperfection. Christ comes to reconcile all things to God, *all things* in creation. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in this work of ceaseless love, raising all things to fulfilment. And each Mary shows us in her own way what it is to offer that love to the world and to share it in the still centre of our being.

Fr Steven Shakespeare