

SERMON "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS ?"

Rev Geoffrey Usher

On Saturday 25 March 1995, about a dozen people gathered in the Schoolroom of Underbank Chapel, Stannington. The occasion was the Sheffield District Association's Day School — which was held in alternate years, alternating with the bi-annual Arts and Crafts Festival.

The theme for the day was "Language and Labels: Limitations and Stereotypes".

The first session, led by Underbank Chapel's Minister Ernest Baker, dealt with the use and abuse of language; it dealt with the ways in which some words are associated with particular religious traditions, such as

Nirvana	Buddhism
Atonement	Judaism
Salvation	Christianity.

And it dealt with the ways in which the meanings of some words have been changed or distorted, so that they are no longer simply descriptive but are used as labels to marginalise people.

June Pettitt, who later succeeded Ernest Baker as Minister of Underbank Chapel, led the second session, looking at language and gender stereotypes.

Some women feel excluded by the language of worship which portrays God only as Father and people only as men.

The anonymous personal reflections of two Unitarian women stimulated some thoughtful discussion about images of Goddess and the Divine Spirit.

I want to share those two anonymous personal reflections with you.

1. Our regular service uses traditional language: "he" or "father" for God, and "man" for people. Our minister and many of our members feel that every one understands this to be inclusive and that using non-sexist language is distracting and would injure the loveliness and the meaning. I respect this, as the majority's choice, but week after week I sit there feeling demeaned and excluded, in spite of what they say. I wonder if there is another church somewhere that would respond to my sensitivities – but I don't want to be without a church community. A guest preacher spoke to us a few months ago, and he actually based his sermon on Teresa of Avila, and talked of the women's movement as a transforming force of our day, a 'revolution in human creativity'. What a joy that was for me! And it didn't hurt the rest of them a bit.

2. As a Golders Green Unitarian I have, for years, taken on board the whole issue of sexist language. We Golders Greeners have scoured our hymn books and readings and held beautiful and memorable women's services. My God had long been androgynous, more goddess or spirit than anything else. Our minister, with a deep interest in feminist theology, constantly supports and alerts us. So imagine then, last Christmas, I go with my mother to a small Celtic church in far West Wales. The church, on the site of an old hermitage, is small, the welcome warm. The liturgy and hymns are deeply traditional, God is only a father. I love singing, but how to keep my self-respect and perhaps alert others to possibilities? I will not embarrass my mother, she had long since come resigned! Well, 50 per cent of my sung gods became goddesses, half of the fathers – mothers, mankind definitely humankind. I did get some funny looks – no, I did not sing extra loud. My mum gave me a lopsided grin. Halfway through the service we were moved nearer the radiator! I hope my behaviour was not too revolutionary. This community of worshippers were mostly women. We women must provoke thought, we deserve recognition, and I'm quite sure that God is not male alone.

"God is not male alone". In a way, that phrase led neatly into the final session of the day, which I led.

I distributed copies of two meditations by American Unitarian Universalist minister Charles White McGehee, from his book Answers in the Wind. The book was published in 1969, so the two meditations were written in the language of the fifties or sixties, about 60 years ago.

The first piece is called "We Look At Ourselves". It begins:

Modern man looks at his history, to see clearly what he was.
He looks to his men of science for explanation of what is.
He is half afraid to look to his religion to see what he might be.
He is in a volcanic chasm between inner soul and outer reality.
Let us propose a new man, now grown ... the real man ... the whole man ... who proudly thinks and acts as a man.
The humble man, who knows he will find his answers in no one Primer or Testament, but from many books already written and yet to be written.
The reverent man, knowing his guidance comes not from the example of any prophet, but from many prophets whose lives will become a part of his life, his dreams, his decisions.

The second piece is called "A Creature of Dreams". It begins:

Man must realize that he is not a trespasser in a world he never made, but rather he is an integral part of its making, the very consciousness of its meaning.
His problems are largely of his own making, but so is his progress.
He can now make resounding music across the universe, with a substitution of love for cruelty, ecstasy for pain.
He is alone only when he forgets that he is totally dependent upon other humans for all he is and all he can hope to be.

You may have noted the exclusive use of words like "man", "he" and "his" in both pieces. You may have thought the language a bit old-fashioned. You may have thought it could easily have been re-cast into non-sexist language.

You may have done all that, and mentally done the re-casting as I read them. You may be able easily and comfortably to do that sort of private re-casting whenever the generic "man" is used, in everyday conversation or in worship.

You may not have noticed the exclusive language. You may have found the two pieces moving, powerful, inspiring, affirming – and not at all disturbing.

You may be thinking: What's he on about? Exclusive? Sexist? What a load of nonsense! What a waste of time! Why doesn't he talk about something important?

You may have found the two pieces deeply disturbing. You may have felt excluded by them; you may have felt them to be almost offensive in their apparent disregard of half the world's population.

My challenge to you is: Listen!
Listen to what I want to read now:

1. Modern woman looks at her history, to see clearly what she was. She looks to her women of science for explanation of what is. She is half afraid to look to her religion to see what she might be. She is in a volcanic chasm between inner soul and outer reality. Let us propose a new woman, now grown ... the real woman ... the whole woman ... who proudly thinks and acts as a woman. The humble woman, who knows she will find her answers in no one Primer or Testament, but from many books already written and yet to be written.

The reverent woman, knowing her guidance comes not from the example of any prophet, but from many prophets whose lives will become a part of her life, her dreams, her decisions.

2. Woman must realize that she is not a trespasser in a world she never made, but rather she is an integral part of its making, the very consciousness of its meaning.

Her problems are largely of her own making, but so is her progress. She can now make resounding music across the universe, with a substitution of love for cruelty, ecstasy for pain. She is alone only when she forgets that she is totally dependent upon other humans for all she is and all she can hope to be.

How do you feel now?

Do you feel affirmed, inspired?

Do you feel disturbed, just a tad uncomfortable, or perhaps even a teensy bit irritated about being excluded?

Did the re-cast versions sound different, or create different images for you, in referring to "woman" rather than "man"?

I would be willing to bet that the women found the re-cast versions much more directly affirming, much more directly inspiring, than the original versions.

And I would be willing to bet that the men found it difficult to feel as though the re-cast versions even referred to them, but found their images entirely female, quite exclusive, and unlike those created by the original versions.

Transposing the passages into entirely female language provides a challenging revelation.

A challenging revelation. I grew up in the Adelaide Unitarian Church knowing that women could and did chair meetings of the congregation and the committee. I happen to remain comfortable with the term "Madam Chairman", and I dislike the word "chairperson" for the person who chairs a meeting; even more do I dislike "Chairwoman".

BUT: The issue of exclusive sexist language is important. It is not trivial. You can only claim it is trivial if you found no difference between the two original meditations and their re-cast versions. If they affected you differently — whether you felt affirmed or disturbed by the re-cast versions — then their language is important.

So: What are we to do? On the one hand, we might be stuck with the traditional male language, and the understanding of the generic "man" to mean "both men and women" — try even reversing that : "both women and men"; and the need to realise that sometimes "man" is not being used in the generic sense, but is specifically male and not female; and the constant need for women to decide whether they are being included or excluded, whether what is being said refers to them or not.

On the other hand, we might do what I did with the two pieces by McGehee, and re-cast the whole language into female terms, and use "women" generically, to mean "both women and men".

I don't see either of those as providing a generally acceptable, comfortable solution to the dilemma.

We are limited by our language, aren't we? A dilemma involves a choice between difficult, equally unpleasant alternatives. On the one hand ... on the other hand ... We can too easily be seduced by the language into thinking that there are only two alternatives – or, should I say, that there are only two options?

Well, "alternatives" may imply only two, but "options" doesn't have that implicit connotation; and, fortunately, there are other options.

We could try, using the word "humankind" or "humanity" instead of "man". The problem with that is that "humankind" and "humanity" are singular, and we run into problems with pronouns — do we refer to "humankind" as "he or she"? That's awkward. Do we use "it"? We are talking about human beings -- the human race — not a thing. "It" doesn't seem appropriate.

One person who tried the exercise, after the Day School, was Jan Howard. She found it an interesting exercise, and wrote me quite a long letter. I want to share with you some of what she wrote:

The problem I found in reworking the pieces ... is that the perspective and tone are changed. In the original there is a sense of the speaker standing outside and observing the universe and history and man's part in the drama. There is implicit reference to the journey of Everyman, the concept of the universal man. This "God's eye view" gives a weight to what is being said, and it aspires to prophetic utterance.

Changing "man" to "we" shifts the point of view. The speaker becomes "one of us", limited and fallible. The note of authority is lost.

Perhaps this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Though it means that in one way the reworking is not faithful to the original, perhaps the tone and perspective are more appropriate to the content. Perhaps it makes a shift towards the aspiration "to proudly think and act as a man" (or alternatively "as mature human beings!").

I find an interesting tension in the original between the view of human nature it articulates and the style it adopts to express it.

Yet another way of reworking them would be to retain the third person but use the plural: to talk about "people" or "human beings", about "them" and "their" part in the drama of the universe.

That gives yet another perspective, yet another tone. Who is to say which is the right, or best, expression? There are no easy answers, and we may differ about the ways in which to develop the answers. We may indeed see the questions and the problems in different ways.

I finish with more of what Jan Howard wrote:

The word "man" in the generic sense is both useful and powerful. It doesn't become repetitious as alternatives so easily can. It has all the resonance that attaches to its having been used by the best thinkers and writers in our tradition. To discard Shakespeare's "What a piece of work is man" because of the needs of the historical moment would be too great a loss.

(I re-cast that as my title for today's sermon: "What a piece of work is ?

However, as Shakespeare was writing from his social context and was extending human consciousness by his authentic and free use of the language, so should we be trying to express our own truth in our own way. We might even manage to do some of the ground work on which great writers will build in the future. No achieved writing comes out of the blue. The best is the voice of the time, and it builds on attempts of those who previously tried to find "new skins for new wine". The Greek version of the New Testament was written in the vernacular and it was a long time before its literary value was recognised. The work of other writers of the time, who struggled to copy the style and archaisms of four centuries before, has not stood the test of time.

Our language is lagging behind our experience, and our sense of ourselves. Many people feel that what was said in the past, and how it was said, does not fully express who we are. We are not exactly sure who we are, but we do know that we need to extend our understanding of ourselves, and that we do this through language. Our adaptations and our adjustments make us what we are.

Alterations in our use of language are both a mechanism and a result of change.

Part of this need to tell our own truth in our own way is to be found in the attempt to shape the language so that it is inclusive. Because, historically speaking, women have only recently been perceived as mature human beings, the images and conventions that have been attached to the word "man" over time have, in fact, given it a gender bias.

This bias has limited society's perceptions of the full range of human potential, as well as the perceptions of possibility in individual human beings, both male and female.

I would like to keep the word "Man" in general usage but extend the images and free up the conventions attached to it. However, I think most people would be as disturbed by the female pronoun in relation to the word "man" as they are when it is attached to "God".

Alternatively, maybe we could try to define more clearly, either explicitly or implicitly, the sense in which the word is being used.

I like Hume's "There is in all men, both male and female, a desire and power of generation."

There's plenty to think about in what Jan wrote, isn't there?

The re-generation of ourselves and our language is an expression of this desire. I believe we have the power but I also believe that it is foolish to expect ourselves to get it right overnight. It is a long-term process, bridging the chasm between our inner soul and our outer reality.

But we need to work on it.

Amen.