

Sunday, 12 March 2023
Choral Evensong Marking International Women's Day
Ephesians 6.10-20; Gospel of John 2.13-22
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'We must strive for better than this'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Many moons ago, when I had a spring in my step, and was bright eyed and bushy tailed, I was elected president of the Graduate Society at my college at university. Only the second woman and first ever black person to hold the post, there was real support from the tutors and my fellow students, and rabid rage from other quarters of the graduate student population. I must say that I wasn't elected because I was a woman, though that may have played a part. Rather it was because I had created a cracking manifesto to the tune of YMCA, a manifesto which I had to sing during hustings. This experience was one of those moments in my life when I realised that simply looking at me *in that position* felt like an affront to some.

It has been hard to know where to look in recent weeks for good news, and in particular good news relating to women.

We have had the poisoning of over 1,000 schoolgirls in Iran. In the words of human rights journalist, Deepa Parent "Nobody believes that it is coincidence that it has followed the protests...what you hear from activists and on protest networks is that this is revenge on these girls, and on their families."¹

12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

It can be hard to see what is really happening and who is really behind the state of the world as it is. And the fact that the world can seem so awfully overwhelming leads some to conspiracy theories and the darker corners of the internet. The writer of Ephesians, who may have been Paul or one of his disciples, focuses on "the Christian life as a spiritual struggle, indicating the power of the hostile forces, the means of withstanding them, and the need for cooperative effort."² It is clear that we cannot do this alone, we cannot bring justice alone. It may be hard to know where to look, but we must strive for better than this.

¹ The Guardian, Monday 6 March 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/06/what-do-we-know-suspected-poisonings-schoolgirls-iran>.

² J.D.G. Gunn, 'Ephesians' in Barton, John and Muddiman, John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.844-886, p.1177.

Closer to home, and on International Women's Day, 8 March, the Institute for Fiscal Studies released their report on 'The Gender Gap in Pension Saving'³, which highlighted the gap in the "retirement incomes between men and women".⁴ This was across the board, whether this related to employees, the self-employed, the gap in the state pension, or whether men and women were of working age. The findings were dispiriting and were also confirmed by the firm Scottish Widows who stated that "Today, on average women are retiring with £123,000 less in their pension than men. Gender imbalances in pay, working patterns and time out of work for childcare and caring responsibilities are the key drivers of the pension gap... The average 25-year-old is on track to retire with £100,000 less than a man. Converted into working years, she would have to work an additional 16 years to age 81 just to reach the same level of pension as a man."⁵

Now as someone who has been planning their retirement since she was 14, the idea of working until my 80s is just not part of the deal.

We are stuck in a cycle of denial because the people who set the pay bands and pay scales, and who knowingly pay less to women who do the same job as men, perpetuate a system that says women are less, women deserve less, and women should be less. It's hard to know where to look in society for the fair and just treatment of women, but we must strive for better than this. And in the words of the poet, Rupi Kaur,

"i'm not interested
in a feminism that thinks
simply placing women at the top
of oppressive systems is progress
- *not your convenient figurehead*"⁶

So for us to "fasten the belt of truth around your [our] waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness", means that we have to call out things that do not work, tell the truth, knowing that we will face criticism when we do. The breastplate metaphor "draws on Isaiah 59:17 describing YHWH's breastplate" and it is this breastplate, for people who trust in God, that "keeps them secure in the face of hostile criticism".⁷ We clearly still have some way to go to achieving equal pay for equal work. Institutions and organisations, and their leaders, bear the responsibility for righting this wrong. It's hard to know to whom to look, but we must strive for better than this.

³ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/IFS-REPORT-R250-The-gender-gap-in-pension-saving.pdf>.

⁴ IFS Report, March 2023, p.3.

⁵ <https://www.scottishwidows.co.uk/yourfuture.html>

⁶Rupi Kaur, *Home Body* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p. 150.

⁷ J.D.G. Gunn, 'Ephesians' in Barton, John and Muddiman, John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.844-886, p.1178.

And then as if that wasn't enough news, we also heard from the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, on 8 March that ""Gender equality is growing more distant. On the current track, UN Women puts it 300 years away...Women's rights are being abused, threatened and violated around the world," he added, as he ticked off a litany of crises: maternal mortality, girls ousted from school, caregivers denied work and children forced into early marriage".⁸ It is sometimes hard to know where to look for the solutions that will end these horrors, but we must strive for better than this.

It must also have been hard to know where to look when Jesus entered the temple, but his entrance and actions there point to institution and purpose. The temple, with its courtyards and layers of sacred spaces, had been overtaken by human greed. It had lost its Godly focus. A space of worship and a house of prayer had been subjugated to the rules of the market. And I think that is what happens to women and our bodies. We become subjugated to binary rigidity, cultural structures, market forces and economic imperatives. Profit is more important than equal pay, suffering more accepted than fair access to healthcare, and institutional patriarchy more treasured than liberation. As one scholar writes "Jesus is seen here in a towering rage. Yet, there was nothing new about the buying and the selling that was taking place in the Temple. It had been going on for generations. His anger reminds us that anger as an emotion is not wrong in and of itself. Because practices are long-established does not mean they should continue to be tolerated. There are things we really should get angry about, such as injustice and inequality in our country and our world."⁹

It's hard to know when our anger will translate into others becoming more accountability, but we must strive for better than this.

We read this passage from John's Gospel knowing that it is framed by the resurrection and is slightly different from how this episode, the cleansing of the temple, is presented in other Gospels.

'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' 20 The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

⁸ The Guardian, 6 March 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/06/antonio-guterres-un-general-assembly-gender-equality>.

⁹ <https://www.sacredspace.ie/scripture/john-213-25>.

Striving for better than this means firstly acknowledging that we cannot do this alone; we need God's grace, the liberative model set before us by Christ through his death and resurrection, and the creativity and the expansive imagination gifted to us by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, we need to recognise that we are caught in systems and structures that will fight change and fight justice, so we need prayer to give us courage, and prayer to stir the hearts and minds of those in institutions to wake up and make the change we want to see a reality. We also need prayer to agitate us into action, protect us from apathy, and defend us from dismissal and personal attack when we fight for justice and inclusion and the simple message of God's love. Thirdly, we are implicated this Lent to see that who is in the temple, who constitutes the temple, who is excluded from the temple, and what the temple does, matter. What the Church does and where it stands reverberates around our society and the world. And, as Christians, we must stay focused on the purpose of Church and its power to bring Jesus's healing love and undiluted freedom to all. The Church cannot be a navel-gazing club, distracted by its focus on piety and condemnation. Church of England, please take note.

It is hard to know where to look, but we look at ourselves, first, and then at others within and beyond the institutions, structures, and systems, to remind us that we can and must strive for better than this.

Amen.