

## Sermon

**Preached at service marking 100 Years since the Ordination of Constance Coltman  
and celebrating Women's Ministry**

**St John's United Reformed Church, New Barnet June 11th, 2017**

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Readings:

Galatians 3.23-29

Luke 10.38-42

I am grateful for the witness of Constance Coltman (I can recommend the short film which was made specially about her, and which I enjoyed watching.)

I was interested to read about the debate in the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1909 about the ordination of women, and to see Kirsty Thorpe's comment that at the time, the idea was shelved, because of the opposition in the CUEW council. These issues of what seems like a departure from tradition don't always get an easy passage!

Constance Coltman served, with her husband, in six different pastorates. (one of these was Wolverton in Buckinghamshire where my grandfather had been a minister over 30 years earlier, and where my father, also a minister, was born)

In reading about who she was, I noted the comments about her not being a campaigner, which I could easily have assumed she would be. Rather, she responded with courage and faithfulness to God's call to ministry and went where she believed God was taking her.

100 years after her ordination, I find myself wondering how far she knew that she was such a significant pioneer, who would be remembered across the country in these anniversary celebrations. She was a key role model for women in ministry, who broke the mould for women and who was also a role model for ministry itself.

I want to make three points about role models.

1. The importance of mould-breaking role models such as Constance Coltman and the need to celebrate these.
2. The significance of women as role models in the scriptures and what these role models have to say to men and women today.
3. The way our supreme role model is Jesus Christ, and the way in which this role model offers inclusivity.

1<sup>st</sup> point I want to make is about the importance of role models.

I've been ordained 40 years. My calling came during my teenage years growing up in South Africa, where my father was called to be minister at the Central Congregational Church in Johannesburg. During all my early years I remember a close friend of the family, the Revd Dr Unez Smuts, who was the first woman to be ordained in what was then the Congregational Union of South Africa.

What was significant about this childhood time was that I grew up taking women's ministry for granted. It was just 'there', it was a matter of fact, it was one of the norms of my life.

I started exploring my own call to ministry when I was about 15 and had to fill in a form at school about what I thought I was going to do when I finished. I found myself writing, almost without thinking 'enter the ministry'. My teachers hadn't had the same experience of Unez Smuts as I had, and they were full of very good reasons why this would be a completely crazy idea, and how many much more suitable options there were for a woman!

I persevered, and came to England when I finished High School just after turning 17, in order to further test out my call. As maths was my best subject at school I got a job training to be a computer programmer. I wanted to take time for prayerful reflection on my call to ministry.

My biggest experience of sex discrimination actually came, not in the church, but in the insurance company in which I worked. After about 18 months in their employment, they informed me that it would be a high risk for them for me to continue with the full course of training, as I was so young and might get married and have children. So I left the company. 18 months later I had candidated for ministry and began training at New college, London. God had other things in store for me than computer programming! But I've always retained an interest in computers.

I tell this story to emphasise the need for role models, such as Constance Coltman and Unez Smuts. These two role models, and many others, offer an opportunity to celebrate women's courage and tenacity in crossing what had been well-established boundaries and to give confidence to follow in their footsteps.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> point I want to make is about the need to raise up the scriptural role models of women as an encouragement to many different forms of ministry.

I can remember as a teenager being slightly puzzled by the emphasis on men in leadership and the way in which it was said at that time 'well, all Jesus disciples were men – that gives us the role model for leaders in the church.' Even in my younger years I was struck by the question 'well, weren't all Jesus' disciples Jews? If it's said that Jesus only chose men, why isn't it also said that Jesus only chose Jews, and that therefore the role model he was offering was both male and Jewish?' (I always was a precocious youngster with many questions)

There are many scriptural role models of women in a range of ministries. Today we're looking at Luke's gospel and a familiar story about Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha are leading followers of Jesus. Martha is the first person to give testimony to the promise of the Resurrection, as recorded in John's Gospel, although this is not what she's primarily known for.

Mary and Martha are interesting characters. I can imagine the setting. Martha is bustling about, concerned about having enough food for everyone to eat. She gets grumpy with Mary, who is just idly sitting there at Jesus feet, listening to his words. She goes to Jesus and complains about her sister. We might have some sympathy for her, thinking that it's a justifiable complaint.

But at this point, Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better way. It's good to take time to sit and listen and reflect.

If we dug behind the scene, we can see that it was normally the men who sat and listened to the rabbi.

We might have expected Jesus to listen to Martha and to tell Mary off on two grounds. 1. That she was letting Martha do all the work. 2. That it was a man's job to sit and listen to the teacher. But Jesus does neither of these. Instead he affirms Mary and in so doing treats her as equal to the men.

These two women give role models for the church today – and role models which are offered not just for women but equally for men and women.

What's interesting is that the story of Martha and Mary addresses the perennial human issue of the balance between action and reflection in the life of the Christian and the church.

I can remember when I served in Milton Keynes, in the days when it was very much a new housing area, and had the privilege of being part of a team, building a new ecumenical church. I had several experiences of visiting some people who had moved in to the area from another part of the country, who would say rather hesitantly, 'well, I was so worn out by my last church, I decided to give church going a break.' I learnt to refer to WOCS – the worn out Christian syndrome.

There is a time for action, and it is important for Christians to be involved in many different areas of service, especially amongst those who are most marginalised, as are so many in our country today.

But the story of Mary and Martha comes as a reminder of the need for balance between action and reflection. What's interesting is that it isn't just a reminder that there are active people and there are reflective people. It's a reminder that within each one of us – male or female - there are drives towards action and drives towards reflection, and that we need to discover the most fruitful ways to balance these out in our own lives.

Scriptural role models of women speak of the way in which God has always raised up women in his service. These role models speak not just about women, but are addressed to men and women together, to our common humanity.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> point I want to make is about the way in which as Christians, our supreme role model is Jesus Christ and the way in which this role model is a model of inclusivity.

The letter to the Galatians, in the passage we read, uses the image of 'being clothed with Christ.' Here's a role model that isn't just at an historical distance from us. Jesus offers us a model that is present with us, in terms of a person with whom we can be clothed, day by day. The passage also reminds us that in Jesus, we all become children of God. We aren't only young or old, we aren't only rich or poor, we aren't only Brits or Germans, Chinese or Americans, Indians or Africans, we aren't only men and women, we are all equally children of God.

The letter to the Galatians goes beyond the separation of men and women, of Jew and Gentile, of free person and slave. For in Christ, all are one.

What I'm struck by is that it doesn't say that in Christ all are the same. There's a huge diversity in the body of Christ. We glimpsed that last Sunday on the celebration of Pentecost when in Acts there was that amazing list of nationalities and languages who all heard each other speak and understood what was being said.

In Christ, we don't have to conform to stereotypes, we don't have to stay with what might seem like 'permanently assigned roles.' And it's the Spirit who opens this up for us – the Spirit

who comes to be present with God's people wherever they are, the Spirit who's presence often takes us in new and unexpected directions, the Spirit who comes to surprise us.

As a footnote to this thread, I'm interested in those who argue that the Spirit is the feminine person of the Trinity. This is based on the Spirit being the same as ruach in the Hebrew scripture, which is a feminine noun. In the Greek, pneuma the Spirit is gender-neutral. So the argument goes, why not go back to the Hebrew and reclaim the gender of one of the originating words for the Spirit? But here's a topic for another day.

The letter to the Galatians puts the priority of our human identity as being one in Christ. Taking on the clothes of Christ, means putting on compassion and love; a passion for healing and justice; a commitment to a life of prayer and dependence on God. This is our common calling, male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. And if we're to model this calling in the body of Christ, we need to be visibly inclusive in every part of the church.

For today, I give thanks for Constance Coltman and her role-breaking ordination 100 years ago. I celebrate the scriptural models of women's ministry as models for both men and women. I pray that the inclusivity which is God's gift in the body of Christ may yet, by the power of the Spirit, be more widely embodied in the life of the church and of the world.