

## ***The kingdom of God is very near to you*** (OTC14 2019)

It may have escaped your notice but a couple of months ago the Scottish Maritime Museum decided to adopt a gender-neutral policy that avoids referring to ships as “she” or “her”. Not surprisingly, this led to quite a discussion:

Some of course dismissed the suggestion as “political correctness gone mad”.

Personally I blame the campaign to name an arctic explorer “*Boaty-Mc-Boatface*”.

But there is a serious conversation to be had about how we use the language of gender, especially when it might reinforce negative stereotypes and shores up inequalities.

Any student of language knows how usage differs over time. How it responds to shifts of emphasis, some of which may be petty and short-lived. Other changes matter very much indeed; especially those that affect how we relate to each other in balanced, nuanced and respectful ways in relation to ethnic, social, and gender diversities.

When it comes to the naming of boats, (or Eddie Stobart trucks) it's fair to say that it is usually men who do the naming. In many instances of course such naming is intended as an expression of affection or tribute. But, looked at from another angle it may come across as equating the feminine with objects rather than persons of equal worth.

So, sensitivity is helps when we think about these things. Rather than rushing to judgement with knee jerk reactions; we can make a positive contribution by joining in the search for truly respectful, appropriate and unifying forms of language. At the same time seeking to avoid discarding the beautiful language of nuance, metaphor and poetry.

One example is how planets, natural forces, countries, and even the Church are referred to in maternal terms as Mother Earth, Mother Nature, the Motherland and Mother Church. Such images reflect an appreciation of the life-giving and life-sustaining generosity we associate with one aspect of the feminine. Our first reading is a beautiful example of this in which Jerusalem is

held up as nurturing, comforting, joy giving, mother.

But we limit our understanding of humanity as a whole; when we box ourselves or others too tightly into defined gender roles. After all, to live in God's image means to embrace both male and female.

This is something I have been trying to gain greater understanding of myself, especially in the context of recent disputes about how we teach our children values that enable us all to create: respectful, life affirming, and community nurturing, relationships.

In this context I have recently read a memoir by the famous travel author Jan Morris. The title of her book is *Conundrum* which summarises her sense of what she was faced with in her personal circumstances as a transgendered individual. It is to my mind a beautiful but also candid account. It recognises that we all face conundrums when challenged by situations or encounter people who

don't conform to our established expectations and stereotypes.

While being true to herself she is as much concerned with the impact of her decisions on those around her and respectful of different reactions. You cannot read her account as an assertion of rights but it is an assertion of her true self understanding. And as she does this, she shares conclusions that go beyond the usual arguments. Let me share just two extracts that touch upon what could be regarded as the spiritual insights of her experience:

*To me gender is not physical at all but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul, perhaps, it is talent, it is taste, it is environment, it is how one feels, it is light and shade, it is inner music.* Jan Morris

*I had reached the conclusion myself that sex was not a division but a continuum, that almost nobody was altogether of one sex or another, and that the infinite subtlety of the shading from one extreme to the other was one of the most beautiful of nature's phenomena.* Jan Morris

Although we might not necessarily agree in every detail; these words indicate that her story is an authentic one.

It is a story that includes her decision to undergo medical and surgical transition; which some would perhaps regard as mutilation. But the same could be said for the practice of male circumcision addressed in our second reading. In different contexts this surgical intervention can be medically advisable, religiously prescribed or a violation of rights. So in the light of Jan Morris' conundrum and that of so many others, it is interesting to note how the letter to the Galatians asserts: "it does not matter if a person is circumcised or not; what matters is for them to become a new creation."

When Jesus advises his followers how to respond to the way they might be received on their missionary travels he observes that some will react negatively; but others will provide a welcome. We hear Jesus speak about a house where a 'man of peace' resides; but the man is

only one member, whereas the household consists of all family members and servants, regardless of their status.

The household that welcomes is one that recognises as seeks to respond positively to our physical, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs; and it matters not one jot if the household is a conventional one for the kingdom of God to be near.

The Christian community witnesses to the kingdom when it too provides such a welcome.

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