

Theology is not, as a whole, a pursuit that is played for laughs. It is true that japes, slapstick, puns, sarcasm, irony, parody, satire and even toilet humour all are to be found in the Bible; none of the forgoing, intentionally at least, can be found tickling the tomes of academic theology, unless I've been missing the humour section in the library all these years.

Some of you, it is true, laugh during these homilies, and occasionally even in the right places, but largely that is not during the 'theological' section of the sermon, which is the bit where he's stopped talking about his dog, your attention has wandered and your eyelids drooped. And anyway, despite the odd big word added for the intellectual veneer, whatever it is that is proclaimed from this pulpit, it isn't academic theology.

Only once in the eighteen years or so I've been taking this God business seriously have I found myself in hysterics at some dab of divinity, and even then that was right at the beginning, at a night school course at Birkbeck University. It wasn't a joke, it wasn't funny, it just seemed to me at the time in a way it wouldn't be now, utterly preposterous, a case of really very smart people being so caught up in their cleverness they came right out the other side into complete silliness. The seminar was on *Hagia Sophia*, the Holy Wisdom; and the theorem that became for me that night's bladder on a stick was the notion that Jesus was female. The reasoning was thus: in the books of Proverbs, Sirach and Wisdom, Wisdom is personified as a woman. For example from the first chapter of Proverbs:

"Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:"

In the New Testament, Jesus is described in I Corinthians as 'The Wisdom of God': in Matthew's gospel he makes personal to himself what Sirach gives to Wisdom:

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Wisdom is a woman, Jesus is wisdom: ergo, we can talk about Jesus the female.

At the time, that seemed so left field, so ludicrous it reduced me to incoherent blathering. It's not something that would make me laugh now. Nineteen years in Holy

Orders you learn there are many many more ridiculous things to be found in church. However, I'm still not sure that it's very helpful to think that way.

Strangely enough, of the Three Persons of the Trinity- God in everyday parlance- of those three persons, it is only Jesus who can be said to have had a sex, as such, and Jesus was, biologically, male. In pretty much all human cultures, until very recently, you have always to be one or the other sex, even accounting for those who may be intersex or gender neutral. And Jesus in his time and place was Male.

Of the three persons of our Trinity, it has usually been the Holy Spirit which has been viewed as the female principle in the Godhead, the person most likely to be accorded the pronoun 'she' rather than 'he.'

The Holy Spirit is of course not female but nor is she male. It may be useful for us to think of aspects of our experience of God being female, but ultimately sex is purely a function of biology, reproductive biology, something God does not engage in. Humans are usually male or female; snails and earthworms are usually both; God is neither.

If you are of a literalist bent, you might, at this point by bouncing up and down in your pew bursting to point out that I've not long since said 'In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' [that we've several times already tonight been singing Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit] and making a mental note to report me to the heresy commission.

Father. Son. Isn't the gendering there pretty clear?

Not really. When we make a meal of that fact that Jesus was male, we are in great danger of mistaking something which is observable, for something which is significant. When we say that Jesus was Mary's son, yes, it's an inseparable consequence of that statement that he was male: but when we say he was *God's* son, it isn't.

There was a branch of psychotherapy which was very popular in the 60s and 70s called Transactional analysis. You may have heard of a book called *Games People Play*. In this Eric Byrne said there are three ways all adult people can relate to each other, and he called them adult, child, parent. And it seems to fit quite well with reality, as a way of analysing our interactions. But we are not actually relating as adult, child,

parent only *like* a child, parent or whatever, we are not actually being that. And the same is true of the names we give the persons of the Trinity- Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Father and Son is really there to describe the notion of begetting: that the second person of the trinity is begotten of the first. It's not there to give God a gender.

Sometimes you will hear it said that, yes, of course, God doesn't have reproductive organs, he's not male or female in that sense, but he does, most of the time *act* male, and therefore we are right to think of him in that way. Ah, come on!

If we decide that God acts in ways that we think of as male: say scary, boorish, not very good at multitasking, unhealthily obsessed with cars etc. if that is the case, it's not because he *is* male. If we ascribe male characteristics to God it doesn't make him male, anymore than those characteristics when we recognised them in another human actually require a set of XY chromosomes before we can display them. In that sense - what is typical or appropriate behaviour in a male or a female- gender is entirely a social construct.

Here's the point: God is entirely beyond gender, but if we do think of God as male or female it probably shouldn't really matter *except* that we very often co-opt our thinking about God to inform our thinking about each other.

And so we might decide that if God is male, as God is clearly superior to us, then males are clearly superior to females. Or that, as Jesus was male then women can't represent him in the role of priests or bishops or have authority over males.

All this gender talk is in my thoughts today, not only because the festival we celebrate today- Pentecost - is preeminently of the Holy Spirit, but also because it is rightly seen as a great festival of inclusivity. At the very first Pentecost when each of the apostles speak, touched by the Spirit's tongues of flame, what they say sweeps aside the differences of race and language. All heard what they had to say in their own language.

At this festival we take the lead given in the Acts account and celebrate the great diversity of God's children. Very often seeing the difference in others does make a difference to how we think of and behave with and towards each other; sometimes for the better if we take difference into account in our behaviour towards and treatment of others; often for the worse when it becomes the ground for prejudice and persecution.

Sometimes you will hear the platitude 'we're all the same'. We have equal value but we are *not* all the same- we have different genders and races and disabilities and backgrounds and orientations and a myriad other attributes- and yet God comes to each of us, where we are, as we are, speaking our language. Nobody is less than any other and all must change. God, loving each one of us, loves the diversity he sees before him, the diversity that reflects the ebullient joy of creation. Those differences don't make a difference to how he loves us: they are *a part* of how he loves us. God gave us difference. At Pentecost the tongues of flame celebrate that difference. At Pentecost, it's time for all of us to join that celebration.