

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SUNDAY, MAY 19TH, 2024---THE SUNDAY OF THE MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN

MARK 15:45-16:8

“MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN---BUT NO WOMEN PRIESTS?”

(A bit of explanation to start with---this will not be the usual “preaching type” sermon or homily. This is more of a teaching topic on a topic that has been controversial for some decades now---it ties in with today’s gospel lesson which is why I chose to speak about it today.)

Christ is risen! Today is the Second Sunday After Pascha, which we call the Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women. Today we honor the group of women who went to Jesus’ tomb early Sunday morning to anoint His body with myrrh and spices and made an incredible discovery---the tomb was empty! The Lord had risen from the dead! They were first to know and the first to announce that Christ is risen---and so on this particular Sunday, Orthodox Christians especially honor these women.

Many today say that Christianity is a sexist religion and anti-woman. But this accusation is shown false by today’s gospel reading from St. Mark. God chose women to make the Resurrection of Christ known. He did not pick the male Apostles, but women. And women are not only central to the Pascha story. Other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who is divine, who is the most important person in our Christian Faith. Of course, it is a woman---St. Mary the Theotokos, the Mother of God.

But many in our time say that Christianity oppresses women. And these folks would say that the more traditional a Christian group is, the more anti-woman it is. And what church is the most traditional of all? Of course, we are!

Radical feminists say we oppress women because we call God “He”. And because we have no female clergy. Many of this way of thinking have concluded Christianity is a hopeless case and have left their various denominations. Others decide to stay in their churches----and change them from the inside. And in many denominations, they have been stunningly successful! There are now some Protestant denominations (not all!) where there are many women pastors and bishops. In some of the older mainline denominations, the majority of the clergy are now women.

How many do we have? Exactly zero. And we are not planning on changing that easy to remember statistic. We will stay true to our ancient Faith and the ancient truths of God. And because we don’t change, while many around us do, we then start to stick out like a sore thumb.

About 15 years ago I was invited to be a guest speaker at a women’s meeting in a parish in

one of the very liberal (radical, really) old mainline Protestant denominations. A nice lunch, nice visiting with the ladies----and then I spoke about some of the distinctives of the Orthodox Church. And answered their questions. They were fascinated by such things as icons, incense, our pretty vestments, etc. A nice, warm, and friendly session. And then a question came that changed the atmosphere in the room very quickly---“Father, do you have women priests?” As soon as I said “no, we don’t”, the atmosphere went from warm to rather frosty. They didn’t become rude but they certainly questioned my explanations a lot and were no longer very happy with me! I did, indeed, stick out like a sore thumb in that gathering!

We Orthodox are not striving to be odd, but our beliefs are very traditional. And as many churches abandon traditional beliefs (even the traditions of their own denominations) we end up more and more different from them. This isn’t the first time we have been the proverbial sore thumb. When paganism controlled the Roman Empire, we stuck out! When the Moslems poured into Palestine, Syria, Egypt in the 600’s A.D., we stuck out! In Bolshevik Russia in the late teens and early 20’s of the 20th century, we really stuck out! And we paid a huge price in each instance---many were killed, many Saints were made through martyrdom. Yes, we suffered----but God blessed His Church. We came through it, and here we are today.....

So the focus of this unusual sermon today is the question that that lady at that women’s luncheon asked me 15 years ago---“Why no women priests?”. Many (maybe half) of Protestant denominations now have women clergy. The Roman Catholics don’t, but there is much turmoil there about this issue. So women clergy are now seen as very normal by many, but we don’t have even one. Why?

I will mention 3 reasons-----

#1. The Bible---in the Scriptures there are no women apostles, or elders, or bishops. The issue isn’t addressed much in specific ways, because it really *wasn’t* an issue in those times. Perhaps the clearest related verse is by St. Paul in I Timothy 2:11. In that passage he says that women are not to have spiritual authority over men. This has always been interpreted as not allowing the ordination of women.

#2—Holy Tradition----to put it simply: “it’s never been done.” For Orthodox, that simple argument is huge! To have women clergy would be a level of change we can’t even imagine after our 2,000 year history. It’s very hard for us to change even little things----a new melody in the liturgy or replace old icon with new ones..... Imagine this change: if the next time you came to a liturgy, there was a woman in front of the altar saying the prayers. Or if there was a woman bishop sitting on the throne and wearing a crown.

Could such huge changes be wanted by God? We don’t believe so. How could we know better than all the Apostles, Church Fathers, and Saints of thousands of years! The great British writer, G.K. Chesterton, wrote about a hundred years ago-----“Tradition means giving our

ancestors a vote.” We Orthodox give our spiritual “ancestors”, God’s holy people for many centuries, a very big vote, indeed! And they win the vote! We just can’t see changes of such magnitude as being from the Lord!

#3—The underlying reason why the Bible and Tradition say to not have women clergy: because of the representative nature of the priesthood. In the liturgy, the priest mystically represents Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest. This is especially obvious in the parts of the service when the priest faces the people. Christ is then clearly “working through” the priest----the priest reads Christ’s words in the gospel lesson, he blesses the people (it’s really Christ blessing us), he gives Communion (it’s really Christ giving us His Body and Blood), etc. In a mystery, Jesus Christ is presiding over the liturgy in the person of the priest. This is the most important thing about the priesthood.

Gender (whether we are male or female) is an essential part of being a human being. Being either male or female is hugely important and essential. (That is why we strongly reject the thinking of the transgender movement---we love them and wish to help them. But we strongly disagree with their beliefs.) When Christ came, He came as a male. And being male is an essential part of who Christ is, not just a little detail. It is so essential that priests (His mystical representatives in the liturgy) also need to be male---not being male would just be “off”,---the priest could not then be a legitimate mystical representation of Jesus as the contrast between male and female would be too huge.

Some mock this, including those very few Orthodox who say we should have female priests (they are rare enough that I have never met one!). They mockingly talk like this---“Okay, you say the priest has to be male because Jesus is male. So, if Jesus has brown eyes, doesn’t the priest then have to have brown eyes? And if Jesus has black hair, doesn’t the priest then have to have black hair? After all, you say he has to be like Christ!” Of course, our answer to such silliness is that hair color and eye color aren’t important. But being either male or female is immensely important!

And so to conclude on reason #3---priests are male because, as mystical representations of Christ, they must be like Him in such an important way as gender. They must be men.

Moving on towards a conclusion in this rather long sermon----Not having women priests doesn’t mean we don’t like women or see them as inferior. Not at all! For other than Jesus Christ (who is divine), who is the most important person in the Church? A woman—St. Mary the mother of God.

I call this the “St. Mary Factor” . And it gives us a “gender balance” in Orthodoxy. Yes, just male clergy. But the Theotokos is more important to us than all the male Apostles, the male Church Fathers, all the other Saints.... And in a few minutes in this liturgy, we will be singing that she is even higher than the angels! St. Paul?—sure, he’s great! St. Basil—sure, wonderful

and important! But you are very aware, that in our Faith, no man can hold a candle to the Mother of God. And so we have a gender balance. Only male clergy? True. But all we male clergy are *enormously* overshadowed by a woman.

One last note on the Theotokos..... Who could have been a more wonderful apostle than her? But Christ never made His mother an apostle. She has a different role to play, a much higher role to play than any role a man can have in the Church----to be the Mother of God.

Many churches have left behind the Bible and even their own traditions on this issue of the clergy. Most likely, more churches will go in that direction. We won't. If that makes us "odd" and "old fashioned", so be it. We're kind of used to that, anyway! Better to be "odd" and obedient to God than to disobey God and fit in wonderfully with everyone else.

No, we are not anti-women. Today, on the Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women, we remember how God chose *women*, not the Apostles, to discover and to announce that Christ was risen. And it was through a woman—St. Mary----that God came to our world. And in every parish, God works through women as well as men to glorify His Name.

May Christ our God, who for our salvation was born of a woman, bless each of us, both female and male, as we worship Him and live for Him.