

Sermon for International Women's Day 2026 (Lent 3)

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Today is International Women's Day. Today, we celebrate the contributions and achievements of women and girls around the world and commit to removing barriers to their flourishing. But why do we even need an International Women's Day? Surely gender injustice is a thing of the past? We have a woman as Archbishop of Canterbury for goodness sake! Well yes, but the genders are still far from equal, and progress towards equality usually comes with pushback. For example, the appointment of Sarah Mulally has resulted in GAFCON – a group of conservative leaders across the Anglican Communion who believe in a male-only episcopate – appointing an alternative leadership council, with Archbishop Mbanda from Rwanda as its head.

Meanwhile, a recent global study of attitudes towards gender found that 60% of men aged 20-29 believe that they are being asked to do too much to support gender equality, and 57% believe that efforts towards equality for women now result in discrimination against men. This is despite objective evidence that shows consistently and globally that women are paid less, hold fewer senior roles, have fewer voices in government, have fewer protections under law and continue to be victims of gendered violence.

So what is going on? Let's begin with a few thoughts on patriarchy. It is a word thrown around a lot these days, but what does it actually mean. Nicola Slee, a practical feminist theologian, defined it like this. Patriarchy is made up of two elements. The first is sexism, which insists that women and men must be treated differently. The second is androcentrism, which literally means that men are centred. They are the heroes of the story while women and children are the supporting act. Their needs are primary, and they hold the power. It is a system not an attitude or emotion. It is simply a way in which society has, and sadly still does, work. But today the lectionary gifts us the perfect gospel reading to both explore and resist patriarchy: the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Our woman at the well has been a victim of patriarchy both in her own time and ever since. In the story we see how she fulfils gendered roles in fetching water. She is astonished at Jesus' request for a drink of water, as Samaritans – and especially Samaritan women – are regarded as unclean. She lives in a society where she is defined by the men she is related to. And, if we look at how her story has been told and interpreted, we discover more sexism and androcentrism in the centuries that follow. Like millions of women through history her name is not recorded. And in a gospel text which has been expounded by centuries of male preachers and theologians, she is frequently regarded a woman of poor character – otherwise how could she have had five husbands and now be living with someone out of

wedlock? A lack of understanding of the vulnerability of women in male-dominated cultures has led these men to judge her for her choices, without recognising she may not have had any.

What I love about this story is how Jesus treats her so completely differently. He does not oppress her. He does not judge her. He does not engage in the benign paternalism which - while not actively oppressing women - treats them as someone lesser who needs to be protected from the proper grown-up world. He sees her. He asks for her help. He engages her in robust debate. He is refreshed by her company. He uses her to bring an entire village back to God. Jesus makes her the centre of the story.

Jesus does this all the time with women. Think of Mary and her sister Martha, the Syrophonecian woman, Mary Magdalene... He doesn't ignore them. He doesn't treat them as victims. He doesn't oppress them, but he also doesn't pander. He treats them as equals, despite being the one person in the whole universe who was indisputably their superior. He gives them the dignity of their full humanity. He challenges them. He commissions them. And in the case of the Syrophonecian woman, he is changed by her and commends her. For centuries, our religion has been used to limit women, when the One who sits at its very heart consistently set them free. The gospel is good news for all people, including women.

Today, we are opening a new exhibition in the Cathedral. It is called *From the Fragment to the Whole* and is a collaboration between a remarkable glass artist Roberta De Caro and twelve women who have lived experience of domestic abuse. I hope that most if not all of you will be aware that domestic abuse is so much more than being physically assaulted by your partner. Rather it is an insidious pattern of behaviour where someone another person trusts to cherish and care for them instead isolates, coerces and controls them. It inflicts mental, emotional and spiritual damage, as well as physical harm. It robs victims of family, career, friends, finances, homes and sometimes even their own children. Those who survive it are survivors indeed. Domestic abuse is common; it can happen in all sorts of relationships, and abusers can be women, men or nonbinary people, but the patriarchal world in which we live means that the victims are more often women.

Roberta has worked one-to-one with her participants to help them create a glass sculpture which somehow captures something of their story. The glass is broken, fractured and damaged, but through their care, their art, their co-creation, it is recreated into something unique and beautiful; something of which these women can rightly be proud. It is – of course - a metaphor for themselves. I do encourage to stay after the service today and view their remarkable exhibition.

Women who have experienced domestic abuse have too often been poorly served by the church. Even today, in far too many churches, women are encouraged to submit to abusive husbands or find themselves judged for leaving harmful marriages. The theology the church

has taught about gender roles and marriage can make it incredibly hard for women to recognise abuse or speak about it. The theology we find in today's epistle to the Romans has not always helped women in abusive situation – suffering is good for us! Well, there is a difference between experiencing challenges because you choose to follow Christ – which by God's grace can strengthen our faith - and receiving abuse you did not choose and cannot unchoose which diminishes you as well as your faith. But when theology is done in a patriarchal mindset, from a predominantly elite male perspective, the experience of women and others is not allowed to nuance our reading of scripture. Tragically, these blindspots can mean that the words which are meant to give life to those who need it most can end up harming them instead.

We, the church, have been part of the problem. We have not been good news for women experiencing domestic abuse. And so this exhibition is a small act of reconciliation. In it we put Roberta's participants at the centre of the story. We believe them. We honour their survival. We commit to learning from them so that we as a church may be a better place for all victims of abuse into the future.

Last night, we held a private viewing of the exhibition for the women who have contributed their stories and their art. Oh my goodness, it was an occasion of such joy. Beautiful art and beautiful human beings. There were hugs and tears and laughter. Lots of photos – first of the art and then of one another. Tiny moments of healing and solidarity as the participants met one another for the first time. I could not stop thanking them for their courage and generosity in being part of this project. I particularly want to thank Roberta for her incredible vision and tireless work, Coventry Haven for partnering with us and recommending the project to their users, Margaret Lloyd for having the dream that we work with Roberta in the first place and her tireless work for all survivors of abuse and to Georgia, our Head of Arts and Events, who worked so hard to make it all happen.

We attempt to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who treated the woman he encountered as his equals, fully human, in the image of God, whose contributions were valuable and necessary to the purposes of his kingdom. This exhibition gives dignity to women who were once stripped of it, honours the stories of those who were once silenced or disbelieved, it brings joy, colour and light, created by these women who have survived. In spite of and because of their wounds, they contribute so much beauty to our shared life. So come and see the exhibition. Come and see a little piece of the Kingdom of God.

The theme for International Women's Day this year is "Give to Gain". This slogan conveys an important truth. When we give women equal opportunities, respect, education and support, the entire world gains from their progress and leadership. Equality is not a zero-sum game – all of us benefit. So this International Women's Day, let us to commit to following the example of Jesus and to treating all people, women and men, trans and

nonbinary, first and foremost as fellow human-beings, people God has given us to love and learn with, and celebrate the good that each of us brings to the world.