

May I speak in the name of God, who has formed us, loves us, and who calls us by name.

“See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by”. A plumb-line. A bit of rope with a lead weight on the end. Not complex, but used by builders to ensure that a constructed wall is vertical, to check that work has not ever so slightly slipped. An instrument for observing when things have gotten out of line.

In our reading from Amos today God sets a plumb-line in the midst of his beloved people Israel - fed up with the covenant breaking, with the disobedience, with the turning to and worship of idols – of other gods, other ways of viewing the world – things which are out of line with God’s vision of creation. Never again will Israel be passed by, be pardoned – a plumb-line gives a clear indication of when people have strayed, what those in management might call a measure of accountability – this is what is expected, and even the smallest deviance, the first step away, will not go un-noticed. Things will not get out of line.

‘Out of line’, ‘deviant’, ‘divergent’, ‘disruptive’, ‘disordered’ – all terms which, for centuries, for millennia, have been used to speak about women, about LGBT folk, about anyone who doesn’t fit the ‘ideal’ of the male, created in God’s image. Most relevant to the work I do, its women – seen historically as inferior to men, unbounded, less well formed – sources of pollution, and threat. Today we hear of women needed to be put in their place, of the dangers of ‘feminism’, especially when discussed in relation to the Church and Christianity, as if the two are automatically poles apart. Women are overly emotional, irrational, weaker, the ‘fairer’ sex – or they are ‘bossy’, ‘overbearing’. The well-known classicist Mary Beard’s brilliant little book *Women and Power* is jam-packed full of examples and this is what she has to say about women stepping into the public eye – ‘it doesn’t matter what line you take as a woman, if you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway’.

However we are discussed, whatever terms are used, it often feels as though women, and perhaps especially women within the for so long strict male confines of the Church, of the tradition, of the priesthood, of the public person of faith – fall short of the plumb-line, that they are less than the perfect example expected. And people make that known.

But expected by whom? How are we to know what the plumb-line is? Looking at myself for example – to certain people, certain groups, I am ‘radical’, liberal, young(ish), often outspoken - obviously, to many, I would massively fail to measure up – and it’s one of the most persistent, and perplexing questions of faith – how are we to know what is of God? What is our plumb-line? Especially when it comes to issues of gender – I don’t need to tell you how many different ways we can read the bible, how many different uses we can find for it. And yet says the Lord, I am setting a plumb-line - there is a plumb-line in the midst of us.

And I believe that we find this in the person of Jesus, in the mystery of the incarnation, of God perhaps having had enough of metaphor, and of not being understood, and of being misrepresented, perhaps even of plumb-lines – makes known the depth of love for us and demonstrates as God becomes human, how we also, can become godly. This might just be our line – this set of memories, stories, ways of figuring the world out, of coming to terms with what happened what God walked on earth. The Gospels. A way to show us how to treat people, and more so, perhaps how to see people.

To me, one of the most remarkable aspects of the Gospels, and of Jesus is this – and this is the quote, from Dorothy L Sayers, which underpins the entire Eva’s Call project, she puts it so simply, and far better than I ever could – Jesus took women seriously. He never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.”

This is not saying that women are perfect – our Gospel reading today shows us that they are most definitely sometimes not, and the reading also highlights, pretty perfectly for this topic of gender justice, societies view and expectations of women and girls. Still there same, after all these many years. But, what is key, is that there is nothing ‘funny’ about being a woman, for Jesus women do not intrinsically deviate from the plumb-line.

So why do they for some of us?

It is this question that the piece of community art which I was privileged to be a part of seeks to raise up. What started as a scribble on my messy college library desk became transformed into not only a beautiful piece of artwork, but into a deeply felt intercession, a simple prayer highlighting women’s experiences and begging for transformation. It is, as the Bishop of Dorking put it (words I never thought I’d be saying!) a pictorial psalm of lament.

Let me tell you a little bit about it – I’m really happy to chat more after the service or at a later date.

Eva’s Call’ is a response to the ‘Nevertheless she persisted’ movement which highlights female resistance and power against a backdrop of societal expectations of how a ‘woman’ or ‘girl’ should act. The piece celebrates both the persistence of God’s call, and that of those who respond and follow.

It is based upon the lived experiences of ordained and ordinand women drawn from within my own Cuddesdon community and from wider groups of women, accessed through social media. I asked women what had been said to or about them, as women. The response was overwhelming, each word you can read has been said to or about women, and is reported without exaggeration or editing. The central idea was to take these experiences and to transfigure them, through prayer and resistance. Looking directly at institutional, and institutionalised sin, it responds in grace, seeking to transform structures and not participating within them.

To me at least, existing as a woman within the Church, hey, even as a woman within society can sometimes feel like living in a hall of mirrors, with so many different voices telling you who you should be, what you should be, so many projections of what you are. So key in the project was to straighten that mirror – to take all the statements said to or about women in ministry, and to merely hold them up, as reflections of what women have heard, have had to hear. No words of our own were added, no explanations offered. Instead, using art, imagery, glitter, colour – the statements were transformed and prayed over. They were not wiped out, but offered to God for healing.

For it is these statements – ‘psuedo-priest’, ‘bad mother’, ‘too pretty to be a vicar’, ‘I can’t take communion when you’re on your period’, ‘women should stay in the kitchen’ - which fall short of the plumb-line that God has set before us in Jesus. It is these which are out of line, and therefore these – and all their associated pain, shame, tears, confusion, and grief – on both ‘sides’ – which are offered for that divine realignment.

And it is that which we must continue to pray for – for a world which reflects the abundant, overflowing hospitality that Jesus offers us in the Gospels – a world where so-called saints and sinners rub shoulders with each other, where the mighty are cast down and the hungry filled with good things, where all are known and loved and called – for a world – not just a church, where women are no longer raped, abused, victimised, where ‘metoo’ is no longer a hashtag, where the choices of all people are respected, where women are given equal reward and recognition for their work, where men and women are freed to be who God has called them to be. As a church, we cannot be silent, we can all preach this radically good news, we can all be prophetic.

We have been set a plumb-line – ‘There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity’. So why should there be within in the Church?

Amen.