

A Theology of Women's Priesthood, Ali Green (SPCK, 2009)

I am so used to thinking that the theology of women's ministry is all about St Paul that starting to read this book was quite a surprise. Of course the word 'priesthood' is key, and the book's focus is on women presiding at the Eucharist, rather than women as preachers or leaders. That said, the book gives a fascinating insight into many of the issues which underlie opposition to women's ministry, whatever the tradition they represent.

The introduction sets out the premise of the book: 'The relationship between the Church and women has never been straightforward, and the root of the difficulties lies in sexual difference.' I certainly agree with the first half of this. When it comes to difference, the author seems unaware of recent research that minimises the differences between men and women in terms of their performance. But at the same time, women's difference *is* significant, if only because of the way it has been seen (different = lesser), and the basic differences due to the fact that women can bear children.

The book is split into three main sections: 'in the image of God', 'broken body', and 'new covenant'. In each of these, the author looks at 'the story so far' followed by 'the woman priest', showing how a woman priest, while presenting a challenge to inherited understandings, enables the Church to gain a more complete picture of God and of humanity.

The author covers a great deal of important ground in exploring areas such the way women have been seen as either bride (of Christ) or (forgiven) whore, either temptress (Eve) or virgin (Mary); in philosophical terms men have been seen as logical and rational, and representing spirit, while women have been seen as emotional and irrational, representing body or flesh, and their femaleness has been seen as a source of defilement, shame and impurity.

While we may be aware that these ideas have long been underlying views about men and women, the book brings into stark view their prevalence not far below the surface when it comes to how women priests are seen. Only a couple of months ago, I was told of a remark made to a woman priest, 'surely you don't go into the sanctuary when you are ...[menstruating]?'

A number of times I felt that Green was overstating things. 'God has been imagined as an idealised projection of masculine identity, leaving women bereft of a divine horizon and hence of a sense of self'? But yes, it is a fair point. Again, I heard recently of a six-year-old who had deduced that God was a man because that was the message her church gave her.

I was particularly struck by the discussion of women and self-sacrifice. Green makes the point that all too often women's self-denial has entailed serving male privilege, which has been damaging for women, as they have learned to suppress their own desires and failed to develop their full potential. But as this concept of self-sacrifice is redeemed through women's priestly ministry, women should be able to enter into it as 'the chosen option of a free and responsible agent.'

This book is quite an uncomfortable read, and as Green points out, most books on theology do not have words like 'womb', 'blood' and 'miscarriage' in their index. It is written from a feminist position which some readers may not share, but the careful analysis of symbolism shows how deep some prejudices have run, and how liberating it will be when women and men can more fully live and work together as members of the body of Christ.

Rosie Ward
610 words