Discovering A Feminine Godde

By Sr Therese Parkin COS

“And the Lord said…” preached the priest at the parish I was attending, and suddenly, everything changed.

“Why does it have to be “the Lord”? I thought. “We know God is above and beyond gender, but I only ever hear God referred to using male pronouns and male terms. Can God be Mother as well as Father? Can God be … Lady?” That thought was the beginning of the seismic shift in my theology, my practice, and my life.

Until that moment, I had lived my faith in a conventional (but hopefully courageous) way. I studied English Literature and Religious Studies in my BA, and then went on to complete a Bachelor of Ministries degree from the-then Bible College of New Zealand, with a focus on spiritual formation. During my time at BCNZ, I returned to my Anglican roots, and was Confirmed as an Anglican not long after I married my husband in 2001.

I joined the Third Order Franciscans not long after we married, and I transferred my vows to a Benedictine community a few years later, as I found the Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of life, and obedience to God a much easier fit for a married woman than poverty, chastity and obedience! Our dauh-

American artist Harmonia Rosales 2017 work “The Creation of God” is a reimagining of Michelangelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’ depicting both God and the first man as black women.
ter, then aged 4, assisted me at my vows by vesting me in the Benedictine habit – she has grown up with a mother who works fulltime, is married and a nun, and is quite happy with all of that, as is my husband who is my strongest supporter!

Fast-forward five years. My small family were attending a small Anglican church and living our lives as a youngish couple with a small child. Everything was seemingly normal. I was reading voraciously, as is my lifelong habit, and one of the books I read around that time was Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. And then, from left field, comes this thought: why do I never hear God addressed by female names? And following on from that, what is wrong with being female, that (according to Augustine and other male early church leaders) means women cannot be seen as *imago Dei*, fully created in the image of God as *women*?

St Augustine said that,

> “Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together in one.”

I dived into the most serious theological and historical study I had ever done (including the six years I spent doing my degrees) — certainly the most fraught. This felt like a life-or-death situation – the life or death of my ability to respect myself as a woman, the life or death of my ability to connect with the divine.

Is there historical and theological support for calling God by female names?

To my great delight (and relief), there is ample biblical, theological and historical evidence for addressing the Most Holy by female names. I discovered that the translations made of the Bible had frequently changed female names for people, as well as mistranslating female terms and names for the divine. For example, the ancient Hebrew “El Shaddai” is usually translated “The Almighty”, assuming that the term derives from *shadad*, burly or powerful, or *shadah*, “mountains”. However, many Hebrew scholars now understand that El Shaddai derives from *Shad* meaning breast – El Shaddai therefore translates as the Many-Breasted One. The ancient habit of translating the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name for God, as “LORD”, further reinforced the incorrect assumption that only male language was acceptable to name the Most High.

The usage of “Father/abba” to relate to the Holiest is only used 4 times in Mark, 15 in Luke, 49 in Matthew, and 109 times in John (the Gospels were written in that order, from around 60–120AD) – surely a sign of a growing community usage, rather than Jesus’ actual words. Given the Gospels had earlier sources now lost to us, it is possible that the term “father” was used infrequently by Jesus, and was then latched onto by his followers as a quiet and subconscious way of reinforcing the Graeco-Roman worldview of men as *pater familias*, the head of the household, and its use encouraged and strengthened through the years by those reinforcing male leadership and power.

I came to understand that, if we only use male names for God, then that subtly implies that only men are made in God’s image. When we use only male terminology for God and for people in our liturgy, worship, preaching and teaching, we subtly reinforce this incorrect, outdated understanding of God and imply that maleness is “normal” and somehow being female means we are less.

Theologically, we understand that God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and as omnipotent and all-powerful, God will not be limited by gender, and nor should our language for God put God’s power and presence in a box of limited male terms. St Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) called God Mother in her sermons; so too did Julian of Norwich (c1342–1416). Yet despite extensive biblical, historical and theological evidence, including discussions within our own Anglican tradition in New Zealand and overseas over the last 50 years or more, we still continue to primarily name God by male names.

I began to look closely at the liturgy and Bible translations we use. I translated the entire Benedictine daily prayer cycle into gender neutral and expansive terms (where female and male names are used equally) for my own use as a Lenten devotion in 2014. I then tackled *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*. I wrote a version of the Eucharistic liturgy p.404 that removed all male terms for God, replacing them with female or gender-neutral terms. Not being a priest, I was not able to use this, but it was an exercise in trying to find out what it might feel like to be in a liturgy where God was addressed openly as Sophia, Mother, Lady, She. I began to look for versions of the Bible where the names for God were not changed, and discovered both *The Inclusive Bible*, and even more powerful, *The Divine Feminine Version* of the New Testament, and began to experience the scriptures with a new voice.

I found that I could not keep silent about the explosion of love that I had felt since I had openly embraced calling God by fe-
male names – my favourites being She Who Is, following Eliza-
beth Johnson’s book of the same name that was the begin-
ning of the strong theological backbone I needed, Sophia (the
Greek translation of Hokhmah or Wisdom), and Mother or
Lady. I began to think about Jesus as the incarnation of Holy
Sophia in the continuation of the Wisdom tradition, which a
lot of scholars had identified, and reflected that the Holy Child
could be thought of as the Child of the Mother. I began to
discuss my discovery of She Who Is with others.

And that’s where things got complicated.

There was a lot of support, often from older Christian friends
that had gone through the second wave of feminism in the
1960s and 1970s, several of whom had been closely involved
with the Anglican Church and the Prayer Book Commission.

There was also stone-
walling, accusations of
heresy, and refusal to
engage with the theol-
yogy and history, partic-
ularly from some male
priests who clung to patriarchy like a rag-
ged, worn-out old blan-
ket that they wouldn’t,
or couldn’t, let go of.

I tried everything. I
spoke, with love, to
friends and acquaint-
ances at churches – my
own and others. I
spoke with my husband
and daughter, who
have both journeyed
with me on this discov-
ery of She Who Is God-
de (the term I now pre-
fer for the divine – it is an old medieval spelling for the divine,
and is completely neutral with no male connotations such as
“God” has). I spoke with passion to our churchwardens and parish priests, describing my journey and trying to engage
with them over the theological and historical information I
had gleaned through at least five years of intensive study,
prayer and reflection.

I felt unwelcome in regular church liturgy because I only ever
heard Godde named by male names, and that no longer
named my experience of her. I changed the words when I was
singing hymns (first resigning from the church choir) and par-
ticipating in liturgy, substituting she for he so I could be pre-
sent in church. When I used a female name for Godde, Sophia,
Holy Wisdom, when leading intercessions one Sunday in 2016,
I was formally censured by my parish priest and removed from
all rosters in the parish where I, and my dangerous ideas
about Godde, might be expressed publicly. Patriarchy was rampant.

I did find allies – people that felt the same as me, who had
sought Sophia/Wisdom and found her, as we are enjoined to
do in Proverbs and Wisdom. They helped me keep up my
courage. In the end, in desperation, I sought a meeting with
our People’s Warden asking what I could do, as our parish
priest completely refused to engage in conversation about
this topic with us. The Warden recommended we put motions
to our parish AGM – which we did, seeking removal of male terms
when the whole of hu-
manity was meant, and
seeking education for
the parish and changes
in our language for God-
de in church.

So how did it all turn
out? Well, the parish
priest would not allow
the motions on the
naming of Godde to
even be put at the AGM
(giving us no warning of
this so we couldn’t even
amend the motions)
and refusing to allow
discussion on the nam-
ing of Godde. I wasn’t
even allowed to speak
to the motion I was try-
ing to put (which had
been notified to the
parish according to the
correct protocol, three weeks before the AGM). The priest
tried to undermine the motion on naming of people by
putting a much weaker motion from the chair, but at least
there is some intention to remove terms such as “mankind”
and “man/men” when they are intended to refer to all people.
The motion on educating the parish on the female names for
Godde was passed, after my husband spoke with calm elo-
quence, identifying that his experience of the journey was
that knowing Godde by male-only terms was missing so much
of the richness of Godde’s nature.

And where does that leave me? I am still reading, still re-
Moving & Accepting Change

By Revd Rosemary Carey
AWSC Waiapu Link Representative

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”


I have over the past 46 years, followed my husband as he took on new roles; first in Education and then in the Anglican Church. The moves offered me and our three girls, excitement and opportunities to make new friends, discover new places and develop my own teaching and ministry. I often recalled the Brownie song, “Make new friends, but keep the old... one is silver and the other gold”. We settled in quickly and enjoyed the space and place in all of our moves. The moves were also scary and challenging times calling me to adjust, adapt and resettle the family. It was more difficult for me, as I didn’t, like my husband did, have an instant community to connect with. I learnt quickly that home is where the heart is, and as long as we were together and strong in our faith, all would be well.
I was 49 when I set out to obtain my first degree. It was liberating but hard work. Like many other women, I studied part-time while juggling the roles of mother, wife, teacher or priest.

Is this why we are strong as women because we are able to juggle so many different balls at a time?

After I had gained a Diploma in Special Education, I was awarded an NZEI scholarship in 2004, which enabled me to study full time for a whole year, to complete my Bachelor Teaching Degree. Then it was time to concentrate on achieving a Diploma of Theology. I was ordained as a Vocational Deacon in 2002 and Priested in 2007. During this time, I was also writing my historical novel, “The Walnut Legacy” which took 12 years to research, write and get published in 2010.

In 2013 we moved from the Waikato to Havelock North, Hawkes Bay. As I was 63, I planned to retire and enjoy being a full-time ‘Vicar’s wife’. However, I was offered a PTO (Permission to Officiate) which opened new doors to Hospital Chaplaincy, and as a relief School Chaplain, which I responded to and enjoyed immensely. The roles helped establish myself in our new place. However, when I was 67, I decided to retire from paid employment, much to the pleasure of my family!

Permission to Officiate was again offered to enable me to continue priestly ministry when required. I belong to a busy Parish, and the Vicar’s role is demanding, so it was good to be able to offer respite and to help out with some of the ministry tasks. I was also invited to join the Parish Ministry team which meets regularly and offers collegiality and support.

In the past when I was asked that common question, “What do you do?”, I always had an answer, “I teach, I preach, I am an ordained Priest, I’m a Teacher, a Vicar, an Enabler, a Hospital Chaplain, a School Chaplain, a Writer, depending what I was doing at the time.” It took a holiday away after my retirement, to rediscover me … Rosemary. To strip away all the other identities and recognise the most important ones were still present: they are; I am dearly beloved child of God, a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, friend and encourager. I meet with others struggling with the process of a loss of identity, who have had major changes in their lives, often not by their choice, and together we discover the importance of simply being content.

People often ask me, “How is retirement?” I tell them it feels good to be free. Free to have choices. Free to write and free to be wherever God calls me to be.

AWSC has been life giving for me in this space of time. It feels good to know I still do have a voice, still do have a purpose, and still do have a sense of belonging. It is a place where my past experiences and wisdom can serve to encourage and empower others.

My writing bubbles away, and I am now completing the sequel of “The Walnut Tree”. There is no pressure, no time restraint. I am content with “my daily bread” and try not look beyond that. I am still growing in faith, and for that I am grateful. I am especially grateful for all my ‘Sisters and Brothers in Christ’, who are all around the world. They inspire and encourage me to be the best ‘Woman of God’ I can be.

We are blessed with three married daughters, an adopted son and eight grandchildren.

I have lived, loved, laughed, wept, taught and ministered in the following places: Palmerston North - 2 years; England - 3 years; Hamilton - 3 years; Benneydale - 1 year; Ranfurly - 2 years; Naseby - 2 years; returned to Hamilton - 5 years; Oliver, British Columbia, Canada - 1 year; Clandon Christian Community, Horsham Downs - 7 years; St Johns Theological College, Auckland - 3 years; Tirau Vicarage - 3 years; back to Hamilton - 7 years (5 in our own home and 2 years on the Waikato Diocesan School grounds); Morrinsville Vicarage -3 years; Havelock North Vicarage - 3 years and now Hastings - currently in our own home for the last 2 years.

I have taught in all areas of Education, holding several different responsibility filled roles, from a Sole-Charge Principal, as an Advisor for Special Needs, as Senior teacher, as Head of Department and as Deputy Principal. In the Anglican Church, I have been a Lay Representative for Synod, a Vocational Priest, a Vicar, and an Enabler.

Now I am a very contented iceberg, drifting towards home, with only the most important identity of who I am, left to be seen above the water line. Blessings Rosemary.
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