

# Homily preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge

November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Vigil of St Andrew

My friends have always been amused, for reasons I can't begin to fathom, when I tell them that my name – Andrew – comes from the Greek word for *manly*.

I'm afraid, though, that I'm straightaway going to take a sharp body-swerve away from any of the predictable, provocative stuff you might be expecting. I want us to think for a few minutes about the dark side of so-called manliness. Or, to be more precise, about the millennially-old cancer in human society that is the assumption and wielding of power by men. Nowadays it's often called the patriarchy, with good reason. More Greek. It means 'the rule of men', men deriving their sense of power from the idea of a dominant father-figure.

Despite all the advances made in some parts of the world in promoting equality for women, that work is only in its infancy. And like all infants, it is therefore vulnerable. As I approach the end of my time serving this college, and especially the students, I can't help being reflective. And as I look back, one of the most distressing – and sometimes downright angering – set of encounters has been hearing about the experience of women.

Some of my distress, even anger, has been because I've felt pretty powerless to do much to help, in any tangible way. I have had female students telling me about harassment and worse: it might be low-level but unwelcome refusal to take no for an answer, or harassment that can be verbal or sometimes a bit physical; or it might be rape. Part of my distress has been because almost always they don't feel they can do anything about it: 'people won't believe me', they often say.

Why should you have to endure a man grabbing you on the dancefloor of a club? – which is to say, usually grabbing from behind, and grabbing inappropriately.

Why should it be necessary to have signage in women's toilets which gives a code phrase – 'ask for Angela', for instance – to say to the bar staff if you are being hassled? - which is to say 'I need help, I'm feeling unsafe.'

Why should you have to watch eagle-eyed to make sure someone hasn't spiked your drink, to make sure you don't find yourself hours later in the street wondering how on earth you got there and what has happened?

Why should you have to endure the manipulative power-play of a lascivious supervisor or senior colleague?

Why should you suffer abuse within a relationship, from someone who knows you're particularly unlikely to be believed?

And why, even if you end up in a room with someone, should you not be able to change your mind about what is happening?

There is real, constructive work being done by way of education and activism in this area, but that too is still in its infancy: still vulnerable. The roots of patriarchal power go very deep.

There is another area of life where I have a strong interest, where the male assumption of power and superiority is still alive and sickly well: this is the push-back against LGBT+ rights. Such antagonism, whether rooted in inherited culture, or in a theological standpoint, always has patriarchy at its roots. When it comes from a church leader or congregation, it's almost always a style of Christianity where men wield the power. And since it's about sex, sexuality and gender, taboo rears its mindless head too: look for the anger, the feverish moralising of such antagonists.

Now this is a tinily short homily, so I'm dealing in the broadest of brush strokes. There are many men who by instinct or with ethical effort resist the male will to power (which is a human construct, after all, not a divine design fault). And, sad to report, there are women who don't get it. I recently met a senior journalist from a well-known Sunday newspaper who specialises in reinforcing male prejudice.

Every word of the Bible, across its thousand years of writing, comes from a time when the patriarchy was absolute. Women were not just under men's authority, but their property. This is one of the hardest aspects of biblical interpretation for us to get right, because things have only changed in degree, not in kind.

But, as with other matters of profound, Christian-ethical importance, the ingredients of a better way are also to be found in the Bible: pre-eminently in the teaching and life of Jesus. Even in that milieu, Jesus was able to scandalise his hearers – and especially the religious hierarchs – in his ignoring of taboos: none more so than in his encounters with women – women often from a different class or culture. If you hunt the stories out, you discover that St Paul's words are true to Jesus' deeds:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3.28*

We are still working this out. If we are men, we should be doing this, to use other words of Paul, *with fear and trembling*. Because we men are heirs to millennia of misused, appropriated power. We should sit in sackcloth and ashes and beg forgiveness of our sisters and mothers, and shed tears of real, viscerally-deep penitence.

Never let us talk of manliness again.

Andrew Hammond

*Isaiah 52.7-10; Matthew 4.18-22*