



# **AUTUMN EDUCATION PROGRAMME 2010**

**The Alpha and the Omega – the First and the Last  
The Bible Opened for All**

*“The need for our half changed world to  
change further is urgent”*

**Being Biblical, Being a Woman**

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**ST MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS**

# Being Biblical, Being a Woman

Lecture 3 in the St Martin-in-the-Fields Education Programme  
*The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last: The Bible Opened for All*

Delivered by Lucy Winkett at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London

I have just moved to live on Piccadilly. Amazing place to be – and despite living in different parts of London for the last 16 years, everything is new.

I didn't know, until I lived on the third floor of a busy London road – I didn't know that red double decker buses have white roofs – I had no idea and was really shocked when from my house I looked down on Piccadilly to see that the buses *are not red all over*. I felt rather scandalised..... and suddenly the keeper of a secret....

It's all about perspective.

Here is the bible. I read it along with everyone else. But if I have switched on my eyes and ears and listen from the perspective of a woman, self consciously, then I see things, new things in familiar stories. Things I didn't know were there. Like assuming from street level that the bus is red all over, familiarity can prevent you from seeing something else – and so a change of perspective changes my view and changes my mind.

Of course these are our sacred texts – but we are often too careful with them.

Reading versus *wrestling with* “the bible”.

As a woman, with the stories of Tamar, Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, Mary Magdalene, the woman with the haemorrhages, the early church leaders Phoebe, Tabitha, Lydia, Prisca, and with the female presence of Holy Wisdom throughout the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts, I *encounter* the bible – not just read it – in many different ways.

I will fight it – when I read the horrifying foolishness of Jephthah whose hubristic vow meant that he felt compelled to burn his only daughter alive (Book of Judges). I will love it when I read of the beautiful faithfulness of Ruth – where you go, I will go – to her beloved mother in law Naomi (Book of Ruth). I will cry when I hear from the lovers in the Song of Songs that *love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave*. I will be furious when I read of Mary Magdalene fearlessly telling the men that she had seen the Lord and not being believed (Gospels of Mark and Luke). I will admire the strength of the Syrophaenician woman and the persistence of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak. I will wonder at Martha's sheer nerve when she accuses Jesus of practically causing the death of her brother (Gospel of John) and I will be immensely moved at Mary's quiet insistence at the wedding in Cana after her son's rather rude dismissal of the servants – “just do as

he tells you". Being biblical and being a woman can be a bit of a roller coaster if we want to encounter Scripture – not just study it, dissect it or listen to it read out once a week.

The model of encounter I am suggesting is that of Jacob's wrestling with the angel and it comes from a foundational book in the study of Scripture by women – that is the book "Texts of Terror" by Phyllis Trible. Like Jacob who wrestled the ambiguous figure by night on the banks of the river (Genesis 32), for those who want to live the abundant life we are called to live as Christians, a vigorous and emotional encounter with Scripture has to be part of our story. Phyllis Trible's book *Texts of Terror* is one which shocked me when I first read it and still is a foundational text for many who thought they knew the bible well. It is a classic but it is not a comfortable read. As a Hebrew specialist she is able to get under the skin of four stories from the Old Testament – that of Jephthah's daughter, the slave woman Hagar, the princess who was raped (Tamar), and the unnamed woman/concubine who is raped and murdered at the end of the Book of Judges. First published in 1984, it is not a book for the faint hearted but its purpose is not to provide eye-catching narratives that shock believers into feeling sorry for historic women. It is to expose the terror, the complexity and the sadness that contribute to the truth telling of Scripture as far as women are concerned.

Feminist biblical scholars – among the most influential are Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Phyllis Trible - have taught us to read the bible in new ways, and in doing so have helped to "break open" the traditional perspectives revealing a more fluid, less certain arguably much richer mine of treasures.

One important thing to say is that the very title of this lecture is itself problematic for a feminist reading of Scripture. The very notion of "Bible" is, feminist scholars argue, a barrier to nuanced and fruitful encounter with the texts. We call this *The Bible* – an English word that finds its roots in the plural of Greek for book *biblion* (diminutive of *biblos* which means papyrus). But the way we talk about *The Bible* encourages us to think of it as one unified coherent text. "The Bible" is a unifying organizing principle around which is gathered a collection of disparate texts Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, the selection of which texts is in itself problematic for women – because they weren't there (4<sup>th</sup> century councils of Hippo and Carthage, 16<sup>th</sup> century Council of Trent for example). A term that feminist scholars often prefer is "Scripture or "scriptures" – not denying the unique and even *God-breathed* (cf Letter to Timothy) nature of these sacred words, but releasing them from the singular and restricting "The Bible". We categorise, number, organise and quote the scriptures in English in such a way that can if we're not careful reduce their nuanced beauty as the word – the word made flesh – of God.

Just this small example of language and its use illustrates the changes that women can bring when they self consciously interpret the Scriptures as women. Women who have historically been marginal to the church's selection, translation and interpretation of these scriptures now bring their experience to bear on familiar texts. It is often an interrupting, sometimes disrupting experience that can bring discomfort and raise temperatures all round.

Feminist scholars of scripture find new ways of interpreting the texts. The hermeneutics – that is the *process of interpretation* is something we all do whether or not we realise it. We all have the spectacles of our own identity, experience, hopes that we put on and it is impossible to read scripture divorced from those experiences. In which case, feminists have developed what they have called the *hermeneutic of suspicion* (Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza). That is, when reading a story, try to get under the skin of it – are there any women in this story? If so, how are they portrayed? What are the assumptions underlying their roles? The hermeneutic of suspicion

energises our reading and takes seriously the relationship between the scriptural text, the text of our lives and the context of the writing. The hermeneutic of suspicion is followed then by the *hermeneutic of re-visioning*. Learning new language and delighting in a widened perspective. There begins a conversation which is endless.

The dilemma for women who read scripture, who participate in church, who want to live as disciples of Jesus Christ is vividly drawn by Virginia Woolf in her 1938 essay “Three Guineas”. Having received a letter asking her to donate money to her old school, she imagined giving three guineas to three causes which she thought would provide ever greater opportunities for women to participate in public life and take a more decisive role in the affairs of society. In describing the historic marginalisation of women, she uses an image familiar to those of us who go to church; a procession.

*There they go, our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money”* and she adds, that as far as women are concerned, *there, traipsing along at the tail end of the procession, we go ourselves.*

But then she asks her women readers: *we have to ask ourselves, here and now, do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?*

Virginia Woolf *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1938 pp 60-62)

The historic interpretation of Scripture for local communities, for nations, for a global audience has been done exclusively, and today still, if global Christianity is considered, almost exclusively by a *procession of educated men*.

I am not here to trash without mercy the androcentric interpretations of the bible that have dominated Christian teaching and preaching for 2000 years. This scholarly set of traditions has of course yielded much fruit, to use a biblical phrase, and has been by turns inspiring, revolutionary, consoling, oppressive, liberating for 2000 years.

Some women however, including some prominent feminist scholars (Daphne Hampson, Mary Daly) have denounced Scripture as irredeemably sexist. It is not possible they say to redeem a religion which is so androcentric, which grew out of a society where women were the property of men, where their evidence was not admitted in a court of law and so on. The very fact that the central symbol of Christianity is a *man* whose words are “gospel”, whose life and death are the paradigm for all humanity, these facts are incontrovertible and Christianity by its very essence then is bad for women.

Some of these women have become *post Christians*, identifying this androcentric religion as a stage in the development of a more egalitarian and healthier religion. Other women have stayed in Christianity, attempting to find ways to live with the texts of terror, and what the catholic theologian James Allison brilliantly calls the “clobber texts” that we are “clobbered” with whenever the bible is quoted to restrict women's role (eg I do not permit a woman to teach a man 1 Timothy)

But if women stay, what do we do with what we call The Bible? What do we do with this if we are Christian women or Christian men who want to be freed from its undeniably pre-modern androcentric context?

I will offer some thoughts about this – but first, imagine with me all the men – and a few women – who over time have interpreted Scripture publicly. Imagine them – there are thousands of them. They are all musicians in a symphony orchestra. For a long time, the music, the text of Scripture that they have in front of them has caused them to play huge romantic and strong tunes. Each of them has a part to play on a different instrument - each player will be contributing a thread of music that is in itself “true” but is in itself incomplete. Listen with me to the strong, powerful, melody played by thousands of strings backed up by the trombones. The music is certain, it has momentum, it is lovely – and secure. As the piece goes on, the players start to discover not so much melodic sweeping tunes but a few persistent and very discordant piccolo notes that irritate and disrupt the big melodies. As the piece goes on over time, more of these notes are sounded and some of the cellos put down their instruments to listen. New players with new instruments walk onto the stage and start to play - not of the Western tradition – the dutar and tablar for example – and the violins realise that these instruments are demanding that their violins are played in a different way. Some of the players really don’t like it and they stop playing, start to pack up their instruments – they didn’t realise that this kind of music was over the page – they thought they knew this music – it was just going to carry on as it was. The music changes significantly over time – with new melodies, some discordant notes, and disrupting rhythms. The result is a series of movements – sometimes temporary chaos ensues – but the conductor – a bare footed figure with wounded hands and feet – will continue to conduct and hope that people will follow. There are many players who weren’t allowed to audition for the orchestra who, over time, come and join in - and as the players turn over each page of the music, they find the range is wider and the dynamics more creative as they go along.

Developing this image, women have had to decide over the years – and are still deciding – whether to go into another room and start their own orchestra, or whether to trust that their place is with the orchestra already playing. Sometimes, a whole section of violas or cello players are women – and they play together much to the astonishment of the rest of the orchestra. I imagine the feminist theologians making up the entire woodwind section – improvising on the saxophone, bending the notes on the clarinet and insisting the music is more like Gershwin than Bach. Make of this picture what you will – but for me, it illustrates the dilemma that many Christian women have faced when they become discontent with the androcentric interpretations they read, hear from the pulpit and find reinforced in conservative public conversations.

What have feminist scholars done with “The Bible”? 3 options

1. We discover a unifying thread that runs from Exodus to Jesus – which essentially reveals God’s liberating and prophetic direction for humanity. A “golden thread” as rosemary Radford ruether describes, where the underlying movement of the spirit, the beat underneath the detailed stories is a movement across generations from slavery to freedom, from confining expectations to a liberation to be ourselves. Other more problematic texts are then tested against this.
2. Or we select texts that have been overlooked in the sweep of androcentric interpretation and discover not so much underlying beats – but counter traditions – eg Tribble’s work in *Texts of Terror*.
3. Widen the definition of the canon of scripture – so that extra biblical texts are mined for further hitherto hidden clues to the role and meaning of women’s place in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. In this treatment, canonical texts themselves are the products of androcentric hermeneutics - so this approach tries to listen hard to hear the silenced voices of women’s perspective.

So these approaches are ways of overcoming the inherent cultural chasm that is fixed between the authors and the readers.

### Examples of each approach

The “golden thread” that Ruether identifies follows the broad sweep of Scripture as essentially a story of God’s longing to liberate people – an ever beating pulse that underlies the Hebrew story of the Exodus, that can be heard in the cries of the prophets, that is found in the tradition of Hannah’s song of liberation, echoed by Mary in her Magnificat and Jesus in his reading at the Nazareth synagogue: *I have come to bring sight to the blind, I have come to set the captives free.* This “golden thread of Scripture she argues, is the direction of travel if you like of God’s presence and action in the world. Jesus’ sometimes shocking and liberating treatment of women is in this thread of teaching – allowing himself to become unclean as the haemorrhaging woman touched him, speaking to a Samaritan woman at noon at the village well where Jacob fell in love with Rachel, (John 4) and of course his close association with Mary from Magdala, entrusting to her the news of his resurrection. Jesus becomes a transgressor of rules and boundaries and his complex relationship with “the law” is, for women at least, a liberating force. Ruether will focus too on the “golden rule” – *do to others as you would have them do to you* – and sets more problematic stories and texts alongside this essential direction of God’s action in the world – which is to set all humanity, including women, free.

The second approach is to mine the scriptures for women, for stories, that have been ignored or made easier to accept for a patriarchal church and society. I will mention just three short examples – one from the Hebrew Scriptures, one concerning doctrine and one from the New Testament.

Phyllis Trible re-tells the story of Tamar who is to be found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Samuel 13. 1-22. Tamar is a princess – and her story forms part of the wider stories about King David’s court. David has three children Absalom, Tamar and Amnon. In devastating detail, analysing particularly the verbs used in the telling of the story, Trible reveals a horrifying story of the trapping of Tamar as she is commanded to look after Amnon who is pretending to be ill. He sends away the servants so that they are alone and then he rapes his sister. It is a powerful story, skilfully told. Tamar is taken in by her other brother Absalom who also, two years later exacts revenge on Amnon and has him murdered. David, their father, is not supportive of Tamar when the crime is reported to him, and Tamar herself is described as destroyed and desolate. The adjective used for this in Hebrew has the association of a creature who has been torn apart by wild animals. The effect of recovering stories like this – and there are others – in our Bible – is, for me, to de-familiarise ourselves with it – to remind ourselves that our scriptures are simply themselves – they cannot be controlled or domesticated and Scripture is neither a dictionary type volume – where I can go to look up definitions of life – nor is it a rule book where I can go to look up what I should do – but it is of itself Scripture – and this horrible story is part of the story of humanity’s past, and tragically, present.

Another simple scholarly point must surely make it into our daily church life, a point that Alwyn Marriage makes in her book “Life Giving Spirit” – that the Hebrew word for the breath that moved over the face of the waters in Genesis – is *ruah* – a feminine noun. The Greek word for spirit in the New testament is *pneuma* – a neuter noun – and when it is translated into the language of the church, it becomes the Latin *spiritus* – a masculine noun – and so therefore in English liturgy the spirit is *he*. Tracing this simple linguistic history reveals at the very least a deep ambiguity about how the Spirit could be newly envisioned for our church and liturgy.

There is a person mentioned in the letter to the Romans –Junia- described as “outstanding among the apostles”. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century John Chrysostom assumed along with other contemporary teachers that Junia was female – and preached that she must have been very wise to have been given the title apostle. But reaction set in in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in a commentary on the letter to the Romans by Giles of Rome, influenced by Thomas Aquinas (who famously as you will know thought that women were misbegotten men) - and she began to be preached as *Junias*, a man. Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century popularised a re-interpretation of her as Junias – a diminutive of a male name – she couldn’t possibly be female as an apostle, and so she was lost to church life. She is being restored now – but her name does not trip off the tongue for most church goers.

The third approach is to take other texts seriously too – and recognise in doing so, the construction of our scripture which in itself can silence or edit out the woman’s perspective. One example of this is in Mark’s gospel as he tells the story of the execution of John the Baptist. The protagonists in the story – Herod and John are portrayed as being manipulated by Herod’s wife Herodias, who plots against John because he criticised her marriage to Herod in the first place. She manipulates her daughter whom tradition has named Salome and arranges for John to be executed because Herod when he was drunk promised Salome whatever she asked for when she had danced for him and his guests. A close reading of this episode reveals Herodias to be a sort of pantomime villain – totally irredeemable, scheming and powerful. The historicity of this is impossible to judge – but exercising the first part of the *hermeneutics of suspicion* we were talking about earlier causes us to note that Josephus, the contemporary historian, mentions her but without giving her any of these character traits. We should also remind ourselves too that although Scripture tells us Herod loved John, it was still he who vowed that he would give Salome everything she asked for when he was intoxicated, and it was he who ordered the execution of John. Yet in the story he is presented as blameless and at the mercy of his scheming wife.

What effect does dealing with Scripture in this way have – when we are trying to be biblical and be women?

The story of the rape of Tamar disturbs us, the imagining of the Holy Spirit as “she” might disturb us too – the changing of the gender of Junia reveals how church authority works sometimes, the golden thread might console us but may also raise questions of selection and what to do with more problematic texts.

But for believing women, of whom I am one, these processes while essential are not in themselves adequate. Because love is involved – the love of Scripture, and the desire to live the abundant life that God in Christ pours out onto all humanity.

### **The role of imagination**

There are huge advantages to being biblical and being a woman even given the history of exclusion of women’s perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. And that’s because it’s necessary openly to talk about and use imagination.

Imagination is itself culturally conditioned and historically specific. One really interesting example to help us get into this is the different ways a single event is interpreted over the course of a thousand years, which is relevant to the place of scripture and its influence on the public imagination.

This is an example not about gender – but about another fundamental theme in our life and faith: Creation and the environment.

You will remember that in January 2006 a female whale became isolated and swam down the Thames becoming stranded in water that was too shallow for her. Rescuers transported it from Battersea Bridge to the Thames Barrier but sadly she died after a two day rescue failed to save her. Crowds gathered on the banks of the Thames and people openly wept to see the sight, full of pathos, of the stricken whale. It elicited huge emotion and affection. In the following months, plays were written about her and her skeleton was put on display.

In 1658, 352 years earlier, exactly the same event – a whale stranded in the Thames – was seen as a sign of coming calamity, and was interpreted in retrospect as a sign, an augury of the death of Oliver Cromwell later that year.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a thousand years earlier, the same event – a whale stranded in the Thames – caused Londoners to set upon the creature and beat it to death.

The Scriptural interpretation imaginatively of the whale – the leviathan, the great beast of the psalms – and the great beast that swallowed Jonah was in Scriptural interpretation a representation of evil.

Exactly the same event – interpreted differently in each generation not because of any increase in knowledge, but because of a development in imagination. From being a sign of evil (from Scripture) to being a much beloved part of the natural world – humans react completely differently in each case.

This for Christians will affect the way we pray. If we had been saying mass in our 10<sup>th</sup> century churches in London, we may have in response to the whale in the Thames, have prayed in our churches for deliverance from evil. In 2006 intercessions were offered in thanksgiving for the variety and beauty of creation, and an acknowledgement of our interdependence with the whole of creation.

Same event. Different reaction.

A similar development in our imagination can be traced with regard to gender and Scripture. In the year 591 Pope Gregory the Great exercised his imagination when he collapsed together, in a sermon, the figures of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. He preached that they were in fact all the same woman – and so the association of Mary Magdalene with sensual acts, and a string of partners began. She was for the next 1400 years preached as a reformed prostitute.

It wasn't until the 1970s that the Roman Catholic church stopped marking Mary Magdalene's day as primarily the feast of a penitent – and now, although she is sometimes preached still as a penitent prostitute – it is becoming more widely known that there is absolutely nothing in the scriptural figure Mary Magdalene that would suggest a characterisation of what Pope Gregory was identifying as sexual sin. The persistent image of her, mostly in art, is as the “woman on the floor” (*cf Ingrid Maisch “Mary Magdalene The image of a woman through the centuries” 1998*) – ie needy, grateful and clingy in the garden of resurrection in countless paintings of the scene “Noli me tangere”. Alongside these depictions, are beginning to be other interpretations of her – as the *apostle to the apostles* (apostola apostolorum) – the one who, in direct contradiction to the instruction in the letter to Timothy, (I do not permit a woman to teach a man) does go and teach the men – the male disciples - in the sense of carrying the doctrine of the resurrection to sceptical male disciples.

Our imagination gives us a way in to find energy, faith and freedom in the story of the Syrophaenician woman arguing away with Jesus on behalf of her daughter, a whole different

perspective in terms of talking to Jesus from the funny and teasing Samaritan woman at the well; respect for the businesswoman Lydia (the “dealer in purple cloth” Acts of the Apostles) as she supported the early church with her money and leadership – and so on. Our imagination is active every time scripture is read out in church – and for women, because of their historic marginalisation, imagination has had to play a greater part. Women’s imagination is a gift to the whole community and can make new connections with the world we live in today.

For almost all of Christian history, from the suppression of the Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions - from the medieval denouncement of mystics as heretics to the witchhunts of the Middle Ages, from the first women preachers in the radical sects of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, to the campaigners for social justice of the 19<sup>th</sup>, women have been speaking and praying from a situation of marginalisation as far as church authority is concerned. This is a vital concept for us to grasp. The experience of marginalisation didn’t stop women speaking, in fact it energised them and gave them a voice to critique the church and state run exclusively by men. They paid for this dearly, often with their lives. And it is really important that we remember that even in this nation, millions of women have lived and died over centuries believing because of the teaching of the church that *they were responsible for all the sin in the world*, (as descendants of Eve) believing that they were not worthy to speak publicly about their faith, believing that their rightful place was in unchosen sacrifice hidden from public view. And one of the most powerful and disabling arguments that has kept women in these marginal hidden places in religious life is that it is argued that The Bible reveals that this is how women’s life should be. If we believe that Scripture is somehow “God-breathed” – that it has something of the kernel of what it is to be human and how it is to relate to God – then it matters very much how we interpret Scripture. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in increasingly strongly, the notion of the “two spheres” was accepted by men and women alike. Drawing authority from the first Creation narrative in the book of Genesis, men are made to lead, women are made to assist. Men are active, women are passive. Men are made to define and occupy the public spaces of work, trade, law making, political negotiation, nation-building and wars. Women are made for child bearing, with their proper field of activity and influence the private domestic sphere of home making.

Now, at least in the free churches and the Church of England, women are publicly exercising authority in state and church, although the power is not yet equally shared. We are in a new situation; a world view drawn from Scripture that accords women the public authority and respect that is consonant with one *made in the image of God* (Genesis), is one that women and men can take on – and it is a world view that will insist, wherever we are and in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, that the pernicious temptation to dominate, to cling to whatever power we have, to act out of our fear of change, is challenged.

We live in what the American feminist Peggy Orenstein called in the 1960s - a *half changed world*. We live also, I want to suggest, in a *half changed church*. But the prize of a changed world is very great – and as Christians, we believe in the energy of Scripture to be a defining force in this change. This isn’t just a polite conversation between scholars of Hebrew and Greek. The novelist Jeannette Winterson said just this week that the Church seemed only to talk about women and sexuality when the most urgent moral issue in society was consumerism and money. When the editor of the Economist can write a book entitled *God is Back*, and when a pastor in the United States can, by threatening to burn the Qu’ran cause riots in Pakistan, we know that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the stakes are high in the business of interpreting sacred texts.

The context that we live in – 21<sup>st</sup> century London – is one where the roles between men and women and the understandings and myths, fantasies women have about themselves and their lives are complex and not resolved.

The contemporary writer and journalist Ariel Levy has identified what she calls a “*raunch culture*” where essentially the body shapes, sexually predatory behaviours and atmosphere of what used to be hidden in porn magazines and films is now commonplace in the public sphere as a powerful mechanism to persuade people to buy stuff: cars, household goods, cosmetics and so on. In her book *Female Chauvenist Pigs* (published 2005 Simon and Schuster UK) she argues that this exposing of what is essentially porn is a consequence that feminism didn’t foresee or aim for.

It is in this city in this century that Christian women have to find a way to live – and to make those connections with the way the world is now. How do we let the scriptural wisdom of our faith infuse us as we men and women, for example, walk past huge billboards using women’s sexuality to sell more things.

It’s a commonplace that we live in a culture where women’s bodies are not Ok as they are; breasts should be bigger, waists smaller, skin taughter. And it’s important to say too that the incidence of young men taking steroids or developing eating disorders is reportedly rising too – and so the previously gendered image conscious is now more applicable across the board.

A distinctive Christian women’s contribution, based in Scripture, to the current debates in society might look like this:

**First:** confidence in our bodies: we have heard in Genesis that we are made in the image and likeness of God; we know ourselves and we will tell others - there was no mistake in Creation when you were made.

**Second:** after the example of Martha in John’s gospel – the theological, practical, emotional, furious and passionate character a sense that it is our calling to live a *whole* life, our spirit, intellect, our emotion, our thoroughly practical tasks all part of one life.

**Third,** after the example of Mary and the woman who anoints Jesus, sacrifice is not a dirty word, even though it might be incomprehensible to a self satisfied society. A conviction that for women, humility has been an oppressive virtue, unchosen and enforced. When we learn a *redeemed humility* – a freedom in our service, we witness to the love of God for all humanity.

**Fourth:** after the example of Holy Wisdom, a real commitment to the mystical selves we know that we are; a celebration of our earthy connection to the irreducible truth and joy of being alive; and our commitment to holistic lifestyles and relationships – “delighting in human beings” as Wisdom seems to do.

**Fifth:** after the example of Mary Magdalen, a sense that our autonomy as women, our bravery, our vision, our energy, our desire, is realised when we are mutually dependent upon one another in community.

When Rosa Parks reused to give her seat on the bus to a white man in Alabama in 1955, she said “the only tired I was, was tired of giving in”.

The church is tired of talking about women. The debates about women’s place in the structure of the church are not popular and they are often unedifying. But not just for the sake of the church but for the sake of the society we serve do we have the task of committing energy to interpreting the scriptures. The need for our half-changed world to change further is urgent. Christian women

can play our part in imagining what this changed world might be like. We can tell our daughters and our sons that things do not have to be as they are.

It is a world where girls and young women know that their bodies are beautiful as they are.

It is a world where no woman is cut open to enlarge her breasts, or to stretch her face or to be circumcised.

It is a world where a woman alone in the dark feels – and is - safe.

It is a world where no girl or woman is sold or trafficked.

It is a world where all women can read and write and express the secrets of their souls.

It is a world where the wisdom of ancient women in Scripture is prized and honoured, where the authority of women is celebrated and recognised, where the truth of the creation of women made in the image of God is given worldly expression in the teaching and structures of the Church.

After centuries of exclusion, and with women still excluded from the public interpretation of the scriptures in the vast majority of Christian communities, women have started to speak with authority as they wrestle with what we call The Bible, to bring these perspectives into the decision making structures of society and church and to make the world a better place.

### **Suggestions for further reading**

Texts of Terror *Phyllis Trible*, Augsburg Press 1984. Republished new edition SCM Press 2002

Mary Magdalene The Image of a Woman through the Centuries *Ingrid Maisch* trans. Linda M Maloney, The Liturgical Press 1998

The Women Around Jesus *Elizabeth Moltmann Wendel*, The Crossroads publishing company 1997

The World According to Eve *Cullen Murphy*, Allen Lane Penguin Press 1999

Bread not Stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation *Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza*, T and T Clark 1990

Searching the Scriptures volume 2: a feminist commentary ed. *Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza*, The Crossroads Publishing Company 1994

Mary and Human liberation; the story and the text *Fr Tissa Balasuriya* ed. Helen Stanton, Mowbray 1997

Who Needs Feminism? Men respond to sexism in the Church ed. *Richard Holloway*, SPCK 1991

Sexism and God Talk *Rosemary Radford Ruether*, SCM Press 1983

From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology *Marcella Althaus-Reid*, SCM press 2004