

Sunday 3 September, 2023

A sermon preached by Sr. Mary L. Coloe pbvm, at the Celebration of St Pheobe, Deacon, 2023.

In 2003 a film was produced called “lost in translation.” It was a comedy.

For 2000 years the importance of women in the early church has been lost in translation and it has been a tragedy.

You heard this evening the name Mary Magdalene. This is not accurate, as the Greek speaks of her in every Gospel, Mary the Magdalene. The tiny word “the” is missing in English translations, and so her significance is lost. This Mary is distinguished from other Mary’s with a title – Luke says Mary called “the Magdalene” (Luke 8:2), just as Simon was called Peter, or James and John called the Sons of thunder. Mary is the Magdala – from the Hebrew word for a “tower” so Mary is the “towering one” or I prefer – the outstanding one. And she did stand out. The first to see the Risen One, the first sent out to bear witness to the other disciples. Rightly she is now called the Apostle to the Apostles – Mary the Magdala – the outstanding one.

Similarly, our saint of today – Phoebe – has been lost in translation.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he commends Phoebe and names her “deacon – diakanon” and “leader – prostasis” of the church in Cenchrae.

As the port city of Corinth – Christians traveling to or from Rome would have to go through Cenchrae and so Phoebe would be known to the Romans. This is why Paul sent her to Rome with his letter. He was not the founder of the Church in Rome, but she could be his ambassador, to introduce him, through this letter, to the Christians there. So Phoebe was acting as his apostle – sent by him to Rome, to carry the letter, to read and then explain it to the Romans. What a job! Romans is a particularly complex letter and Phoebe was its first commentator. What a shame her spoken commentary was not written.

Origen, a Church Father, sees the verses on Phoebe as teaching 'with apostolic authority that women are likewise appointed to the ministry of the Church.' Using Phoebe as the letter-carrier shows her importance. Commending her, as Paul does, meant sending her credentials to the Christian house-churches in Rome. Phoebe speaks for Paul.

Paul's epistle and Phoebe's action of carrying, it have had immeasurable impact on Christian thought and development. Knowing the significance of this Letter one scholar comments, that Phoebe carried with her, perhaps under the folds of her robe, 'the whole future of Christian theology'.

As long as the New Testament remained in Greek and was read in Greek, her leadership and diaconal role would have been clear. But with the shift from Greek to Latin – the language of the Roman empire – Phoebe lost her job!

She was deposed from being a deacon to being described as “being in the ministry of the Church”, and instead of being a leader she was called “a helper of many.”

Translations in English only went downhill.

She was a servant of the Church, and patron of many (English Standard Version)

The King James Version – Phoebe is servant and succourer.

The New King James – Servant and helper.

New American – servant and helper.

Revised Standard version – deaconess and helper

New International – Phoebe is deacon and benefactor.

New Revised – Deacon and benefactor.

Gradually Phoebe is being recognized as a deacon of the Church, but naming her a leader is still too difficult!

The Greek term Paul uses is προστάτις (Prostasis) – from the word ἵστημι to stand, and pro – in front of.

When this same word is used of an Episcopos in 1 Timothy 3, – he is to be a good ruler, or manager. But Phoebe – heaven forbid that she have the leadership role to stand in front of the community and guide it. So she remains just a helper and benefactor. Her leadership role is lost in translation.

The memory of Phoebe and her importance lived on in the early centuries. In 1903 on Mount Olives a tombstone was found and taken to a museum in Jerusalem. Next to it was displayed the translation in French where it is called the Epitaph of the deaconesse Sophie. This was wrong!

When I read what was written on the slab in Greek, it did not say deaconess – it said “deacon.”

“Here lies the servant and bride of Christ Sophia, the deacon; the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on the 21st of March 323 (according to our dating method).

This tombstone reveals that in the early 4th century, women were still serving as deacons in the Church in Jerusalem – and remembering Deacon Phoebe.

Paul writes *I commend to you our sister Phoebe deacon and leader.*

I wish to commend the Anglican communion who have kept faith with this early church tradition in recognizing the gifts and vocations of women and ordaining them as deacons, priests and Bishops.

All say: Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God.

You have rightly recognized Phoebe and the other women named by Paul for their missionary and apostolic service. And here today, Saint Phoebe is working a further miracle in your midst – as you have invited me – a woman, a catholic to preach in your cathedral.

Thanks be to God.

In my own Church this is still impossible.

I commend the women and men, some sitting here in our midst, who worked tirelessly in the 70s and 80s leading to the first ordination of 8 women deacons in 1986 – here in St Paul's Cathedral. When we celebrate St Phoebe, their names should also be remembered in this litany of holy women,

Mary Elizabeth Alfred,

Angela Carter,

Olive Dyson,

Kay Goldsworthy,

Carlie Hannah,

Marjorie McGregor,

Bessie Pereira and

Kate Prowd.

The witness and vocational passion of Phoebe lives on – thanks be to God.

Sr. Mary L. Coloe pbvm

Professor Emerita, University of Divinity, Box Hill.