

On human beauty: 1 Peter 3.1-12

Thanks to Robin who has bravely taken on today's TFTD!



A couple of weeks before the hairdressers were allowed to reopen, I appeared in church on Sunday with a smart new haircut. A few people commented and I became aware that people were talking to each other about it. So much so that I felt that I ought to explain in my welcome that I hadn't gone to a barber operating illegally but had had my hair cut by my son who used one of those clippers.

It turned out to be very easy for me to have a smart haircut. My son just whizzed the clippers over my head, tidied it up a bit with some scissors and, hey presto, I had the same haircut pretty much as George Clooney.

It was only when I went to church that it dawned on me that for many members of our congregation, a quick whizz over with some clippers does not feel like an option. And that is because they are women.

Even deciding to let the world see that your hair has turned grey is a more complex decision for women. Many women make a commitment to invest in serious levels of hairdressing as part of the image which they show to the world. Men do not feel under anything like the same pressure.

The first letter of Peter contains some beautiful passages to churches that were probably enduring persecution, exhorting them to persevere with a Christian life rooted in God's saving action through the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus. And then the writer comes onto the bit about men and women. And many of us are left wondering what we are to make of this.

Women are exhorted to accept the authority of their husbands.

And they are also exhorted not to adorn themselves with hair braids and fine clothing but rather to let the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit be their adornment.

And then the men get their exhortation. Nothing about hair or clothes. Just an exhortation to honour their wives because they are the weaker sex and to remember that they are also heirs to the gracious gift of life; i.e. women are people too.

Of course that's great — women are people too. But still this doesn't really sit right with us.

It doesn't sit right with us because we have seen over the last 150 years in our society a steady improvement in the rights of women and there is a consensus that, despite this progress, there is still a way to go. This is our lived experience.

And it doesn't sit right with us because when we read about Jesus in the Gospels we see him repeatedly challenging patriarchal assumptions. He challenges those men who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery but had not similarly persecuted the man caught with her. In front of the crowds he shows how his healing power flows out of him to heal the woman with haemorrhages so that this taboo of uncleanness uniquely associated with women is healed. He says to the daughter of Jairus, 'Little girl, arise.' He allows the Syrophenician woman to contradict him in public. The first people to meet the risen Christ are women. And Luke's Gospel records how men and women are equally visible as actors in the parables of the Kingdom that Jesus tells. For centuries the church has had long phases of trying to block this, but the liberation of women, which has consequences all over the world, has its roots in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what on earth is going on in this first letter of Peter?

One way of dealing with this text is to decide that it is just wrong. It is so clearly countermanded by the Gospel that we can simply ignore it. The text may well be among the last to be included in what we now call the New Testament. Maybe this passage is a beginning of the backlash of patriarchy that will ultimately fail as the Kingdom breaks through.

Another way of looking at this text is to consider it an attempt at compromise. Did the liberating message of the Gospels in the early church lead women to believe they could rebel against the authority of their husbands, be in charge of things and wear whatever hairstyles they wanted? Was this causing huge strains in the church? Is this letter suggesting that women retreat to their traditional roles, recast as a particularly feminine response to the suffering of Christ and the promise of resurrection in return for the men treating them with honour and accepting that women are human beings also?

Because in the context of the time it might even be considered progressive to say that women should be released from the pressure to adorn themselves to look pretty for men. It might be quite radical to say that the example of female piety might play a role in attracting new souls to the church. It might be revolutionary to state, as the letter does, that women are just as much human beings as men are; also heirs of the gracious gift of life. (1 Peter 3:7)

A third way of thinking about this text is to wonder whether in the context of persecution, the writer of the letter is keen that the church does not move too far too fast. The church was a liberation movement in many ways but a movement that looked to God for its liberation. The final liberation comes in God's own time and so the task of the church is to survive so that it is still there when that time comes and not expose itself to unnecessary danger. Maybe there is a desire here to ensure that the church did not attract additional persecution with flamboyant displays of women's liberation.

But what are we meant to make of this text today?

The fact that men and women are all heirs to the same gracious gift of life is for me the theoretical underpinning for our efforts to strive for gender equality. It is a theory made real in the actions and saying of Jesus which we read in the Gospels. Asking women to accept the authority of their husbands is, therefore, a formulation I would reject.

Instead, I would embrace the idea that we all, men and women, have an inner self which is very precious in God's sight. Whether we adorn our hair with braids or have somebody run a set of clippers over our hair makes no difference; we can't all look like George Clooney! When we think of the inner self that is precious in God's sight we see ourselves the way God sees us. And then we can see others the way God sees them. He sees beauty in us. And so we may see beauty in each

other. Our church is full of beautiful people. Thus, we may have unity of spirit, sympathy and love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind (1 Peter 3: 8).

Let us pray today for the generations of women who have shown all these qualities, keeping alive the message of liberation contained the Gospel to which they witnessed in their lives and in their very beings. Amen.

Robin Pye
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