**Readings: Micah 6.6-8 and Colossians 3.12-17**

**Good news of God’s Kingdom is freedom:**

Jesus stood up to read,

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
    because he has anointed me  
        to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
    and recovery of sight to the blind,  
        to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And … he began to say to them,

‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ (from Luke)

Good news of God’s Kingdom is freedom for all – including women,

Suffrage, security, equality … not just good for women but good for everyone

Today we have been marking Vote 100, a century since (some) women were given the right to vote – another decade before all women (and men) given universal suffrage – and equally importantly women given right to stand to be voted for. Freedom for women is not freedom to be done to or for, but freedom to be and do ourselves.

For we are fearfully wonderfully made, women and girls in image of God. We reflect, speak, embody God’s glory – not as an add on or supplement to men but independently, equally, made in image of God and partners in God’s mission, sharing stewardship of creation, being fruitful and productive, proclaiming and living freedom of God’s Kingdom. We are ‘God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved’.

Not at expense of men and boys, this is not either/or but for equal and mutual flourishing. Women’s rights are human rights. Everyone benefits if women and girls are free.

I have very publicly had my life transformed by freedoms newly open to women not available previously. But it’s not only Women Priests and Bishops legislation in my own lifetime and experience that have offered freedoms to me. Since 1966 (when I was born) rules have changed that have meant could attend the College I chose at university, could keep my own bank account when I got married (or take out a loan, or buy a house), that I could legally and freely plan the shape of my family, that I can say no to sex in marriage, that I can expect equal pay.

I am extraordinarily thankful for the benefits I enjoy - perhaps even more so for those that are easily overlooked.

I am grateful to women and men whose faithful work, at considerable cost, over many, many years has made the richness and freedoms of my life possible – including those whose struggle made possible this ministry. Most of all I am grateful to God for these privileges, and for opportunity to offer service in Jesus name. And I recognise God’s call to use my freedoms for the liberation of others.

God has told us what is good: ‘to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God’.

I am the first woman in this particular ministry in the Church of England but I believe I’m following in the footsteps of countless remarkable women whom God has called and equipped for transforming mission. The Kingdom of God is not only found in the institution of the church, and the freedoms God offers are not only religious.

Today we have rightly honoured women who have changed politics and the social environment, and who have secured freedoms, Godly, Kingdom freedoms, in every area of life. Today we commit ourselves to continue the struggle for women, and all who are disenfranchised, excluded, oppressed or discriminated against, in our own communities and nation, and across the world.

We do this not because it is ‘political correctness’ or succumbing to societal pressure, but because this is the embodiment of Gospel of freedom in Christ – life in all its fullness, for all.

And God’s people have always been invited, commanded, anointed, to ‘bring good news, proclaim release to captives, restore sight to the blinded, to let the oppressed go free’.

Let’s just consider the witness of women in the Bible who, in different times and in different ways, have been part of God’s transforming and liberating mission.

**Sarah**, who the writer says ‘was able to conceive, though she was past age, because she judged that God who had promised would be faithful’ - she’s a witness to honour when we feel we’ve had to wait to bring opportunity to full fruition and have to trust that God will be faithful; (I also want to honour her for laughing in the face of what God was expecting of her, for recognizing the ridiculousness of the odds against her in completing what was asked, what else could she do but laugh at the enormity of it?);

And the Hebrew midwives **Shiprah and Puah**, who would not heed the Pharaoh’s instruction to kill new-born boys, and by ingenuity and courage, by principled disobedience, enabled God’s purposed to brought to birth;

The prostitute **Rahab**, who the writer says ‘escaped the fate of the unbelievers, because she had given the spies a kindly welcome’ - she’s a witness to honour when women are recognized only for pastoral ‘womanly’ gifts, not for our courage and essential contribution (I also honour her for not letting her circumstances and exclusion blind her to God at work in her life, and her embodiment of God’s call even on the most unlikely).

**Deborah**, judge and stategist - a leader of men at a time when women really were kept in their place, who knew how to build the confidence and trust of those around her to complete the work God gave her (including **Barak**, the man who had the nous to recognise the gifts of Deborah, and listen to her instruction, and **Jael,** who knew how to seize an opportunity when it presented itself - though I wouldn’t want to be thought recommending the use of a tent peg through the temple as a way to deal with our enemies!);

**Ruth and Naomi** who, said yes to risk, an immeasurable risk, in committing to the institution that was Israel, as well as to each other, when the experience of that institution was by no means all positive. And through whose risk eventually came the blessing of our Messiah’s birth.

**Esther** who kept a clear head and a steady heart when faced with crisis, whose elevation to high office, becoming Queen in an alien land, did not make her self-serving but rather used her influence to confront injustice and cruelty, and secure peace.

**Lydia**, a woman of substance and influence, who had the courage to be the first, the humility to be vulnerable and the generosity to make herself and her household available for the sake of the Kingdom.

And **Mary of Magdala**, who had been freed from her demons, recognized Jesus when he spoke her name in the garden. Full of fear, in the midst of grief and uncertainty, she was at risk of loosing herself, blinded to the truth and without hope - until Jesus spoke her name.

We recognize ourselves in Mary, for we too, all of us at some time, have known the isolation of fear.

Although her sisters had been alongside her at the cross through the long hours of crucifixion; although they had followed together to see where his broken body was laid; although when faced with the enormity of an empty tomb they had gone to find her brothers and the men had run to join her; although Mary had faced down the political and religious authorities to accompany Jesus through his passion and death and burial; although she was a woman who, in the company of her sisters and brothers, had been able to be strong and compassionate and faithful and determined, fear isolated her and threatened to overwhelm.

We so easily loose ourselves in fear. Mary was saved when Jesus spoke her name. And because of her we hear the news that confirms and completes the story of God’s great love made known in Jesus; we know that the risen Christ is the completion of God’s love, that ‘perfect love casts out fear’ - and we are free.

We could examine the witness of so many more: Eve, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary of Nazereth, Tabitha, Priscilla – the list goes on and on, faithful women in their time. Some old, some young; some rich, some poor; with different gifts and personalities, all transforming women, honoured and blessed by God and necessary for the work of salvation and the coming Kingdom. They were agents of God’s freedoms in their homes, among their family, in their communities, in the politics and business of their day, in the church. Each was open to the Holy Spirit at work in them and through them making God’s love and purpose known.

Let us pray that there may be something of each of them in each of us, and that we might learn to be like them living God’s love. May we recognise where God is working, especially through those we least expect, women, children, the marginalised and excluded, and so not miss God’s purposes. May we honour the central and vital contribution and place of women, as we see in the bible that God does.

Because we are better at being faithful to God’s call to be people of transformation when we do it together, recognising Christ in one another young and old, black and white, men and women, ‘in the one body’.

The women’s suffrage slogan we have mirrored today was ‘ Deeds not words’ – let’s do it not just talk about it. I concur.

And may the scriptures be fulfilled in us:

‘whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.’

Amen.