

As some of you know, my favourite female popular singer is Dolly Parton.

But my most favourite popular singer - male or female - has always been Tony Bennett.

And it's been a real treat for me when he's been in this country to meet him after a concert, and to chat with him backstage at the Royal Albert Hall over a drink.

He's the last, and greatest interpreter of the Great American Songbook.

Those songs written by the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers & Hart, and songs like Anything Goes by Cole Porter.

Although written in 1934, it could have been written today, if we listen to its opening line: "In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking now, heaven knows, anything goes."

So, bearing that in mind, it might be prudent for an Ordained Catholic Minister, even one who's married, to steer clear of basing his sermon on the second reading; but I believe it would be cowardly to do that, so here goes!

In 1973, when Chris and I were married, ours was what is known as a "mixed marriage" - Catholic and Church of England.

Chris' Vicar insisted that she should say the word "obey" in her vows.

(Although, I think she must have had her fingers and toes crossed at the time when she said it!!)

His reasoning for including “obey” was precisely the passage for today from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.

It was because his interpretation of the passage was that the man is the head of the woman, so she should obey him.

But none of us, for whatever reason, must lift any piece of Scripture out of its context in the Bible, to bolster our own interpretation of it.

Whether it’s to maintain the status quo, or to say it’s sexist, out of date or whatever it might be.

That’s to completely misunderstand what the Bible is about.

Because the Bible was written over a long period of time by people from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences.

But God inspired them, through the words they employed, to bring everyone, throughout all time, into a covenant of love with Him.

So Jesus - the Word of God - has an eternal love for each of us: and the heart and soul of Scripture is just that; the story of God’s eternal love for each us.

This message weaves its way throughout the Bible, and it’s the vocation of the Church to stay true to, and interpret that message in a way that can be understood today, whilst not diluting its eternal truth.

Paul was a First Century Jewish convert to Christianity in the Roman Empire where the rights of women as we know them were unknown.

The family structure was like a pyramid. The man was the head; the woman was subject to her husband - one of his possessions - and their children subject to him.

It was the established and accepted social order then.

I think we completely misunderstand, and misinterpret Paul if we think he sort of “canonised” the tradition of family life he knew to be set in stone forever.

Particularly as the purpose of these verses in Ephesians aren’t primarily to do with the family and who is, or isn’t, subject to whom.

Paul uses the family structure of his time, and then deconstructs it, to show Christians how we should live for Jesus, how Jesus relates to the Church, and it to Him.

This is what he means, after repeating several times the relationship of wife to husband and husband to wife, by concluding that: “This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.”

Eph. 5: 32

Having lead us to think he was making a ruling that a wife must be obedient to her husband; he turns it upside down and says he’s really talking about how men AND women together should live for Jesus!

And EVEN IF he'd been writing JUST about marriage, his first words in this reading: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Eph. 5: 21 takes the relationship between husband and wife to a completely different level.

That one verse puts all the others in this passage into focus since, Paul says, men and women are equal before Christ because of their relationship to Him, with Him, and in Him.

The Book of Genesis says: "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." Gen. 2: 24

That marriage relationship, grounded in God's Word in Scripture, mirrors how intimate our relationship should be with the Lord.

But that relationship was severed and shattered by Original Sin, and then compounded by our individual sins.

And in the Letter to the Ephesians Paul uses those very words from the Book of Genesis to explain why men and women are equal before the Lord.

He writes: "As the Scriptures say, 'A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.'" Eph. 5: 31 (Gen. 2: 24)

And this relationship between husband and wife reflects the bond of love that exists between Christ and His Church.

So Paul wants us to understand these verses at a much, much deeper level than men keeping women under their control.

He's saying that by being united to Christ in His Church women and men are one in Christ, because the damage and separation between us and God, wrought by sin, has been healed through Christ in His Church.

This has the profound effect of there being no second-class Christians in Christ, and His Church.

Although some women, and men, may disagree with that because, for instance, of the question of the Ordination of women.

But because the Church only Ordains men, basing that practice on Scripture, and Tradition, doesn't make us, or any Cardinal, Bishop, Priest, Deacon - or even Pope - a better Christian than anyone else.

Whether we're male or female doesn't have any bearing on our standing with, and relationship to, Jesus.

The question is this. Whoever I am and whatever I do, am I faithful to my Lord, Jesus?

And, is the Church, of which I'm a member, faithful to her Lord?

The primary lesson to learn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is to have a whole new revelation of what the Church is, and what being a member of the Church means.

We shouldn't just equate the Church with only what we can see on the outside; the externals and the institutions.

The heart of the Church has its roots planted in the Body of Christ spread out on the Cross for our salvation, which sprang to life through the power of His Resurrection, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Church, the Body of Christ, into which we're adopted as sisters and brothers of Jesus, where we're fed with the Body and Blood of Christ, and nourished with the Word of Scripture.

And the fundamental reason for the Church's existence is so that Jesus can give His Body, the Church, of which we're members, to His Father without any stain or blemish, and radiant with holiness.

That's what we're called to; it's our vocation as Christian women and men.

And if we respond to Him then He'll: "Equip [us] with everything good for doing his will, and work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ.

All glory to him forever and ever! Amen." Heb. 13: 21