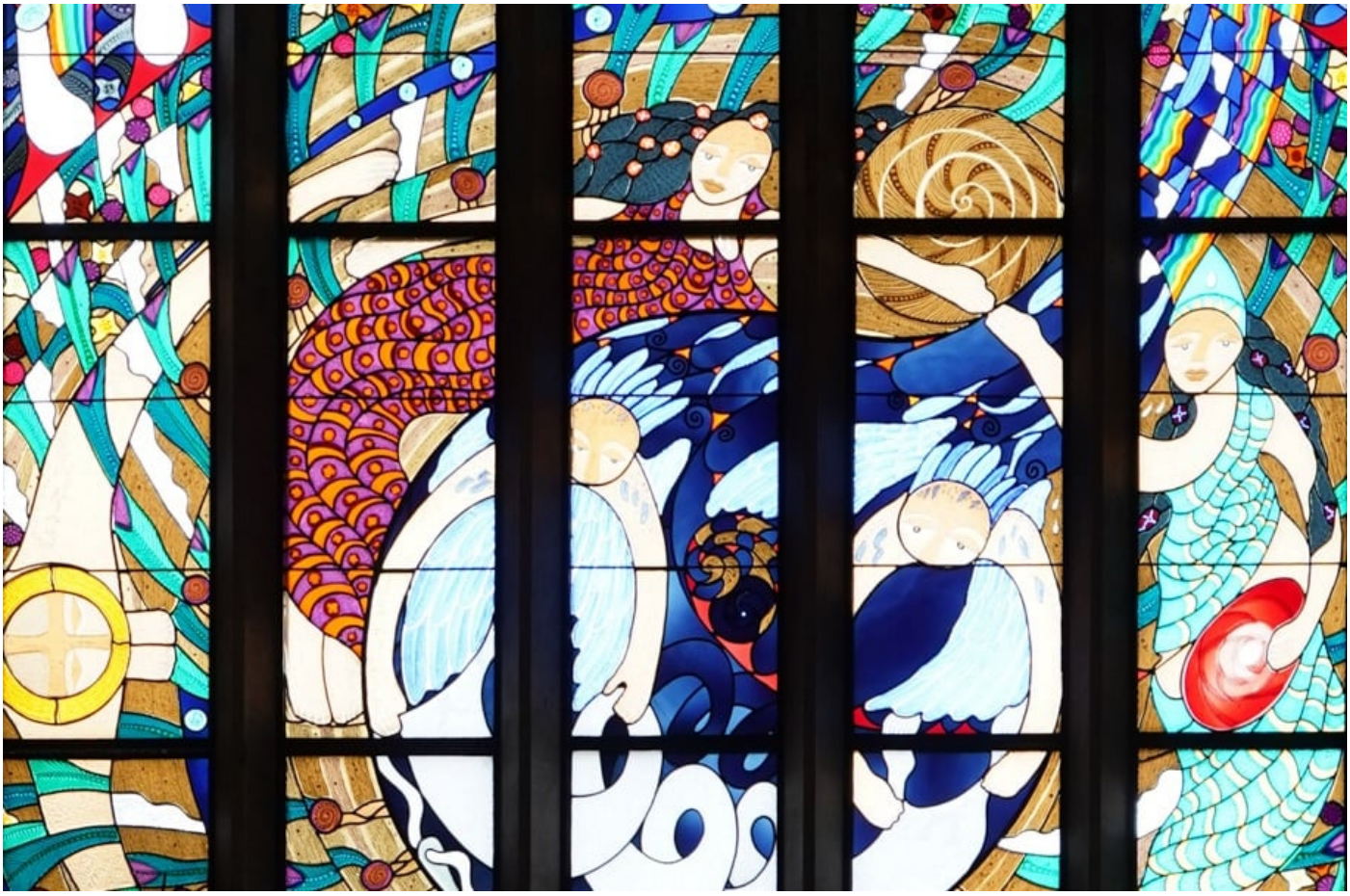

St Mary Magdalene and the problem of powerful women

Bishop Sophie Relf-Christopher

Recently, I was writing a sermon for the patronal festival of St Mary Magdalene and was reminded that Mary was the â??apostle to the apostlesâ??, not Jesusâ?? girlfriend or a sex worker, and that the world, and even the Church (to our shame), has proven disinclined to remember that.

The â??problemâ?? presented by our treatment of St Mary and her legacy typifies a reluctance to elevate the full and equal role of women as bearers of Godâ??s divine image. This is deeply problematic because many scholars, Scripture, tradition, and the revelation of Godâ??s purpose for humanity bid us do better.

Some verses for thought

In Genesis 1.26-27 we find that women bear Godâ??s image just as men do; in Deuteronomy 32.18 and Isaiah 66.13 we see the ancient image of God as a mother; In Psalm 123.2 God is the mistress to her handmaid; in Luke 15. 8-10 God is the allegorical woman seeking the lost of her household; and even Jesus conceives of himself as a mother gathering her brood in Matthew 23.37. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Recently, our Diocese has taken a couple of good steps forward that move us closer to fully realising that women, just as much as men, are bearers of the divine image.

Inclusive Language

The first is the new Inclusive Language Policy. Women and men have made good gains over the years by affirming the need for inclusive language in our diocese, particularly in our administrative functions. Thank you for your service! It is now common for parishes to use more inclusive language and for our ordinances and policies to be gender inclusive. The new Inclusive Language Policy does not take away from that ambition, but also adds:

3.4. Commitment and language for/of God

The Diocese of Adelaide recognises both the need for a sustained and intentional approach to the use of inclusive language when speaking of the people of God, and encourages the use of a wide range of metaphors when speaking of God.

Scripture does not shy away from a range of images for God, including those of mother and woman, and we ought not either.

Parental Leave

The other important policy addition is the Parental Leave Policy.

Like me, you may find it surprising that we did not have one in place for employees, but thankfully, we do now. The clear message is that the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide wants to be a responsible employer of choice for both women and men.

It is also worth celebrating that we continue to have a healthy ordination pipeline. A proper Parental Leave Policy will only help us meet our obligations to future clergy and demonstrate that we are a diocese for people at all stages of life. That is why we will also need to discuss adopting comparable parental leave allowances for stipendiary clergy at Synod this year. It is long overdue.

I pray that these developments are an encouragement to many women and men throughout the Diocese of Adelaide, and I thank God for them!

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