***Sophia* - Wisdom.**

In memory of Marcia.

In early 2013 a beloved member of our Inclusive Catholics' community, Marcia de Groot, accepted our request to pen a few explanatory words for the I.C. web site about the group's use of the term, Sophia, as an inclusive way of referring to the Divine. Marcia had worked on a draft to show me over lunch at my house on May 3rd. When she did not appear that day, we knew something was very wrong, and subsequently found that she had died at home the day before. With the community's encouragement, and assisted by the wonderful research that Marcia had undertaken, I have endeavoured below to put a few finishing touches on her excellent article. The memory of her sweetness as a person and her spirit of commitment and generosity within the I.C. community will live forever in our hearts, alongside our enduring love for her. Vale, Marcia.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that the mystery of God is properly understood as neither male nor female, but transcends both in an unimaginable way. And insofar as God creates both male and female in the divine image, and is the source of the perfections of both, either can be used as metaphor to point to the divine mystery. Indeed the use of both, she insists, is needed to enlighten and deepen in our consciousness the incomprehensible mystery of God.

The Hebrew Scriptures - as with the later Christian and mystical traditions, whilst drawing their predominant speech about God from the pool of male images, were also able to present the feminine face of God by using images and metaphors taken from the world of women's experience. For example, in the book of Jeremiah we hear the voice of Adonai speaking to her people, "In everlasting love I conceived you." (31:3). In Deuteronomy, Adonai is compared to a mother bird nurturing and protecting her young, "Like the eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, God spreads wings to catch you and carries you on pinions." (32:11) Then, in Psalm 22, the psalmist appears to depict God as a midwife, "Yet you drew me out of the womb /you nestled me in my mother's bosom /you cradled me in your lap from my birth."

But perhaps the most fascinating expression of the feminine face of God is found in the figure of Sophia, Wisdom Woman. She appears in the Wisdom literature of Job, Proverbs, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. Regular attendees of the Inclusive Catholics' community will be familiar with the use of 'Sophia' and 'Spirit-Sophia' as terms favoured by the community to honour the inclusiveness of the Divine. However, whilst we may have heard Sophia's name mentioned during Community eucharists, in the context of the new second

Eucharistic prayer perhaps, or at the end of the Common Prayers - ("We ask this prayer through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and Sophia Spirit ...") some of us aren't really familiar with terms 'Sophia' and 'Sophia Spirit', or what they mean. So, who is Sophia?

Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom. Throughout the Wisdom literature Sophia, Wisdom Woman, is depicted first and foremost as relational. Her connections extend to every part of reality. She is the first-born of God, "Adonai gave birth to me at the beginning, before the first acts of creation."(Prov 8:22) Wisdom is God's companion and co-worker in creation, "When the foundation of the earth was laid out I was the skilled artisan standing next to the Almighty." (Prov 8:29-30) She is an intimate friend of God. God knows the way to Wisdom "for God is where it is." (Job 28:23). In the Wisdom of Solomon she is a world principle, both immanent and divine, "She is so pure that she pervades and permeates all living things. She is a breath of the power of God", (Wisdom 7: 24 - 25a), constantly "delighting in humankind." (Prov 8:31)
Wisdom then is God's self-revelation. In some texts she is a creature of Adonai, though a privileged one. In others, she represents another way to look at God, and another metaphor for speaking of the beauty, power and attraction that God holds for the human family. As Elizabeth Johnson succinctly states, both female Sophia and male Adonai express the one God who promises life on being found.

In time the early Christian community came to depend heavily on personified Wisdom (Sophia) for what was said of Christ, transferring to him the precise same terms e.g. he was the first-born of God and the one through whom all things were created. It was this identification between Jesus and Sophia through which the community came to see Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believed God had raised, as the pre-existent one.

Elizabeth Johnson neatly summarises the wonder of Sophia whose name we invoke.

> God is God as Spirit-Sophia, the mobile, pure, people-loving Spirit who pervades every wretched corner, wailing at the waste, releasing power that enables fresh starts ..... From generation to generation she enters into holy souls and not so holy ones to make them friends of God and prophets ..... Sophia-God dwells in the world at its centre and at its edges, an active vitality, crying out in labour, birthing the new creation. Fire, wind, water and the colour purple are her signs. (p213)

Sources:

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