A number of years ago I made the national press, there was a flurry of interest in an interview I had given to the Sunday Times, and suddenly my picture appeared in all sorts of news articles. I even got to be interviewed on Radio 4’s PM programme. In the interview, I suggested that it was not only alright to use feminine pronouns for God but that it might be helpful to do so. It was not a wholesale suggestion of rewriting all liturgy just that our use of only male language for God makes it too easy for people to conflate ideals of masculinity with the divine. People quite correctly challenged me, what about revelation, Jesus called God father and our traditional Trinitarian formula is to speak of one God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now I stand before you today as one who believes profoundly in the concept of the Trinity. As a feminist, I like the fact that Trinitarian theology challenges ideas about individualism and encourages community, that it promotes ideas of collaboration and critiques hierarchy, that it provides a vison of God which is relational, all ways of behaving that feminists alongside other liberation theologians have encouraged and championed. However, I do continue to struggle with the language with which we describe our three in one God.

As a priest, I bless, baptise and pray for people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet, as someone who struggles with the historic marginalisation of women from the power structures of the Church and the Theological Pronouncements, I question whether the masculinity of these terms plays into that ongoing story. Over the years I have pondered on the different way people have thought about speaking the Triune reality: Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier; Beloved, lover, love. Yet, these ways of talking about the Trinity tend to depersonalise God and make the Trinity about the functions of the persons. So, I find myself using the traditional formula even though it makes me uneasy.
No doubt some of you are already wondering why I should find any of this difficult. Yet we all know that language is powerful and so it matters that we at least reflect on what we think we are saying even if we find that these are still the best words to say it. We all know that our language about God is partial. If God is who we believe God to be then any human language and assumptions about describing God will be limited. How can we the created truly speak of the one who created us. Yet we also believe fundamentally that God is a communicating God who seeks us out and draws us in to relationships. More than that is the idea that God, our God, has come down to our level in the incarnated person of Jesus, who Paul tells us reveals the fullness of God in a human face. Our Trinitarian faith goes even further than this revelation of God as we maintain that the Holy Spirit is the fullness of God dwelling in us and speaking through us.

The language of our Trinitarian formula is of course Biblical. In the passage from the letter to the Romans Paul speaks of the Christian experience of praying Abba Father, as we groan with the Spirit waiting to be birthed as joint heirs with Christ into the new kingdom. Jesus spoke of God as Father and of himself as Son, and Jesus was, of course, himself born as a man. Paul’s imagery draws on this to emphasise the legal position of the day: male heirs inherit from their fathers. We, by becoming ‘in Christ’ through the Spirit, are adopted into this legal sonship becoming fellow heirs.

And this is of course where some of the language gets nicely mixed up. We find both Jesus and Paul drawing on distinctly female imagery – birthing and labouring which then leads to a new birth or adopted inheritance which is open to all. We are both born but also adopted, begotten and chosen. Men and women, slaves and free, old and young can be born again and become the heirs. This wonderful mix of people becomes the body of Christ, no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, but all one in Christ. As the reading from Romans reminds us, this is about a new Creation which redeems the fallen nature of the old creation. This is a rich and exciting gospel message which seeks to break down divisions of hierarchy and status.

It is interesting to note that the Church fathers whose theological debates and synods arrived at the orthodox understanding of God as Trinity did show concern that the use of the term Father might make people mistakenly think that God was male. Gregory of Nazianzus in one of his orations said:

*Or may be you would consider our God to be a male, according to the same arguments, because he is called God and Father, and that Deity is feminine, from the gender of the word,*
and Spirit neuter, because It has nothing to do with generation; But if you would be silly enough to say, with the old myths and fables, that God begot the Son by a marriage with His own Will, we should be introduced to the Hermaphrodite god of Marcion and Valentinus who imagined these newfangled Æons.

Our gendered language is difficult when it comes to talking about god who is beyond such things. This is a particular problem for those of us who worship in the English language: as Gail Ramshaw Shmidt points out, we do not gender inanimate objects, ‘in English only living females are ‘she’ and only living males are he,. Therefore calling God he inevitably denotes male sexuality, despite every disclaimer to the opposite.’

This means that however many caveats we might offer to say that God is beyond gender, our liturgical language means that men hear that both the father and the son are male like them and women hear that they are male unlike them.

This has become even more complex when our ideas of men and women’s roles, fathers mothers have become more equal. Even the Royal family has now moved so that sons do not take precedence over daughters in inheritance, and as Paul reminds us this Father-Son language is about that inheritance, one in which we are invited into as adopted heirs.

Historically and currently using distinctively male language for God has consequences for how the different genders are valued and how power is shared. We know all too well that, despite the great advances for many of us, inequalities in gender continue to mean that across the world women are more likely to live in poverty, to suffer domestic and sexual violence, to receive less education than their male counterparts. We know that the Church has struggled to allow women into the places where decisions are made and theology developed. Our own church has come a long way.

Yet, the history of the Church is one where hierarchies have developed and been maintained and where differences of gender and status have been all too easily justified by the way we speak about God. In that first Creation humanity was made, male and female. However, the church has struggled to understand just what it means for women to be made in the image of God. Father God has been assumed to share characteristics with the human father, and the son of heaven makes the sons of earth more fit for the roles of power and privilege than the daughters of Eve.

Women may be made in the image of God, and baptised females may well be fully incorporated in to the body of Christ, but while it has seemed down the ages obvious to assume that male characteristics have analogies with God it has been less common to
draw any kind of parallels between the feminine and the divine. In fact at times theologians have wondered whether women are only really in the image of God when they are in relationship to a man or when in some kind of spiritual sense they become honorary men.

So if female humans are also made in the image of God are their meaningful ways of using female language to talk about God?

If we reflect on the persons of the Trinity we find that at times the tradition does offer us different language, not to replace the traditional but to enhance and broaden it.

God the father is also the mother God in Isaiah who holds her children to her breast.

There is Biblical language which uses both birthing images, as in today’s readings, and Breast-feeding imagery in both the old and new testaments. Everyday female experiences used to help us explore the nature of God.

Anselm in an 11th century prayer surprisingly uses maternal imagery to talk about the 2nd person of the Trinity:

*And Jesus, are you not also a mother,…truly Lord you are a mother for both they who are in labour and they who are brought forth are accepted by you.*

Julian of Norwich in the 14th century also plays with mother language:

*And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature. All the lovely works and all the sweet loving offices of beloved motherhood are appropriated to the second person …*

She is happy mixing up the imagery, calling the second person of the trinity *Our mother brother saviour*

In using this language there is not quibbling with the male Jesus of Nazareth but a rich reflection on the second person of the Trinity present as the Word, Wisdom of God in Creation, salvation and redemption.

So our mother/father God looks on us with Compassion and Jesus births us like a mother into the new family of the redeemed, feeding us out of his own body as a mother bodily feeds her children.

The Spirit has often been depicted in feminine language. Wisdom, the rich compassion breath of God, ‘Ruach’ is feminine within the Hebrew tradition. She broods over creation and breathes life into being.
The reality is that all of our imagery for God is limited: metaphors help us to describe the indescribable, analogies help us to put into words what we have experienced.

We need a rich and varied language for the Trinitarian God. Like many feminists who ponder on the theology of the Trinity, I cannot find a better language for the Trinitarian formula than Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but I try to ensure I use it alongside a more expansive and less gendered language.

So whilst I will still bless in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I will pray at times to our Mother God, as well as God our father, meditating on the first person of the Trinity the Creator God who is beyond us, Perfect Light, Absolute Love.

I will pray to Jesus who has taken my female humanity into heaven, and who feeds me from his body as I have fed children from my own body. Who, as the risen Christ, has a body which is richly diverse, incorporating both male and female, slave and free, all races, able and differently abled bodies, who was begotten not made, light of light, true God of True God.

And To the Spirit, who blows where she will, inspiring, comforting and sanctifying, working within me and beyond me, enabling me to pray when I have no words in the sighs and sorrows, the joys and hopes, the groaning of a world in travail.

Trinity Sunday reminds us that God is beyond our description. Our efforts to describe the reality of God are always imperfect. It also reminds us that how we speak of God affects how we think of God, and how we think of God affects how we think of ourselves and others. So we affirm the complex reality of God, three in one, we affirm that God made us in her own image, male and female.

May our speaking and talking of God reflect this reality drawing on the experience of the whole human race to find images, metaphors and analogies that enable us to worship the one who Created us, who mothered us into being our Father, the one who redeemed us revealing God’s love to us in life, death and resurrection, our mother Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit who brooded over the waters of Creation, proceeding us and indwelling our hearts, mysterious and yet deeply comforting, enabling us to cry ‘Abba Father’ as we are born into the new Creation, adopted as heirs of the promise.

Amen.