

You'll be a man my son?

East Window, July 2006

Growing up in the East End at the end of the War was wonderful. Playing soldiers and explorers on all the Bomb sites; ball games up and down the street (no cars to speak of); the beginnings of Rock and Roll; and Saturday morning Pictures at the Odeon! Bliss. Trouble was that most little girls expected to get married before they were twenty and settle into housework and boys expected to work at the docks and become 'breadwinners'. Like my father, who was a stoker in the merchant navy and then a lorry driver, men expected to lead a life of heavy manual work, but to come home to a ready dinner. On the other hand, although men would assume a protective role, in the home it was the woman who would make all the important family decisions. Matriarchy indeed!

But everything was about to change. Manufacturing industry was moving to labour-cheap countries, and in its place 'service industry', commerce and finance became the UK's means of creating wealth. Metal-bashing men were no longer required. Instead, the market-place was deciding everything and we were all expected now to become consumers and shoppers. 'Honest Sweat' was suddenly an embarrassment – and it was down to the shop to stock up on expensive deodorant.

Many men have found this role-transition very difficult – no longer the sole bread-winner for many families, and not necessarily knowing how to fit in after the birth of the children. Difficult too to find a job where men's skills or strength count – even lorry-driving is now power-assisted! It's even going rather against the grain of society to want to settle down at all until much later in life. No, many young men today find it difficult to know just what their place is.

There are a number of negative options. First is the way of submission – just get on the consuming band-wagon and sell your soul to the shopping trolley – let the market decide who you are. A second response is to down on women, deny there is a glass ceiling, and pretend the male deserves superior treatment at work and at home. Even worse, some young men give up on trying to find a decent male role for themselves and just binge or laze all day.

Instead of those cop-out responses, the Christian faith has some challenging pointers to offer. According to the Old Dispensation, men ruled it over women just as Adam did over Eve. But with Christ comes the New Creation, and a New Dispensation. St Paul struggled with the gender implications of the new Creation in Christ but eventually was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write those liberating words: "neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." It means the old role-assumptions of the heavy-handed man and the submissive woman will simply no longer do and the relationship between the sexes must be one of love and respect, glorying in our differences but honouring our equality before God. Some young men and women are blazing a trail of family relationship on this basis, and model to their children a way of not being consumed by the consumer society, demonstrating instead what a true and holy partnership can be.

But when the negative options are so strongly peddled, who is helping our young people to wrestle with the modern complexities of gender difference and similarity? I fear that it is largely left to the market place and popular media with its inane advertising and its identikit celebrity role-models. But I've become strongly aware recently that today's young

people are wising up – sensing that what our competitive consumer culture is offering is just not enough. God has made us to be one in Christ and to find love and wonder in mutuality – and I suspect that’s why marriage seems suddenly to be in vogue once again.

It was so much easier for our generation – we just fitted in to the given roles and assumptions – but I think as a consequence we may have evaded the Godly challenge of fulfilling our true destiny. Maybe our youngsters, then, are helping us wrestle afresh with the challenge of Christian mutuality?

+ *Laurie Bradwell*