My Lords, I rise with some caution, conscious of the considerable risks as a man speaking on International Women’s Day.

But dwelling in ambiguity is perhaps the lot of those occupying these benches. I am acutely aware, for instance, that as a Lord Spiritual speaking on defence matters, I interest myself in swords and ploughshares.

It was sporting those two hats that I recently watched the RAF’s current recruitment advertisement.

Its images depicts the reality of women in a Service in which every role is open to everyone. We see women readying themselves for combat, as engineers, pilots.

The voice-over, alas, articulates a more familiar reality, in which women are told (no doubt by men) that their concerns centre around lip-gloss, skincare, and the contents of their wardrobe.

The disparity between voice and image strikingly expresses the distance travelled. But also of the many miles we have yet to traverse.

I sensed something of this while listening to this week’s questions and debates in your Lordships’ House. We have reflected this week on FGM, on consent, pay, abuse. On how much has been done, on how much we want done. Of how much there is to do.

I cannot avoid reflecting that the same is true of the Church.

Next Tuesday sees the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Church of England.

The fruits of the hundreds of women who have followed their call are all around us, including in this House – with the Bishops of Gloucester, Newcastle and London sitting on these benches, shortly to be joined by the Bishop of Derby.

In the College of Bishops. Women represented around half of appointments between 2014 and 2018.

And amongst the clergy. I was particularly struck by the comments from a first year ordinand, Hannah Barr, at a recent anniversary service at Lambeth Palace.

She said that, in preparing for priestly ministry, she stood on the shoulders of giants, inspired by the first great generations of women in ordained ministry. They have made the Church better. They have made society better. They were – they are – pioneers.

Moreover, we can look to the promise of the years to come. At Ripon College, Cuddesdon, where I serve as Chair of Governors, half the academic staff are women. On Cuddesdon’s different pathways to ordination we see a clear majority of women. The same is true of a subset of that group – the ordinands on my own Diocese’s training programme, the Portsmouth Pathway. That pattern is replicated more widely.

And yet, my Lords. And yet.

Your Lordships might have noticed I refrained from describing women in ordained ministry as “women priests”. Nor would I describe female colleagues on these benches as “women bishops”. That risks suggesting there are priests and bishops – and then there are women priests and women bishops.

My Lords, no. There are priests and there are bishops, all of whom have been obedient to their call.

Similarly on the numbers. A majority in training does not translate into equality. We are decades from that. Even at that distant point, much will depend on who sits where.

Nor are those numbers decisive. Our culture, in the church and in society, has some distance to travel before we can confidently say we are inclusive. As one ordinand, Jo Winn Smith, put it, equality only happens when men start doing what women do, not when women do what men do.

My Lords, we have much about which we must be humble, perhaps even penitent.

I wonder therefore if this is a moment for celebration. It is rather more an occasion to mark, to take note.

So, my Lords, I leave you with this thought. Christians – or more exactly theologians - are fond of the word “eschatology”.

I risk the ire of those same theologians for grossly simplifying a complex notion. But we might say that eschatology is interested in progress towards the end time, and anticipates that time – the time when all things are made new.

It is, I think, a helpful concept for today’s debate. Progress, yes. But we have much, much more progress to make before we reach one particular eschatological moment. That is our arrival in another country – a country in which we find it no longer necessary to mark International Women’s Day or the anniversary of the ordination of women.

Because in that other country equality is so embedded in our lives, our practices, our very beliefs that what is right is what is normal, unexceptional, natural. We are still, my Lords, far indeed from that New Jerusalem.