

A WOMAN'S PLACE ?

Sunday 17th July 2016

Luke 10:38-42



“A woman’s place is in the home”. Have you ever heard this comment? Do you agree with it? Indeed, it only seems a generation or two ago that women were required to give up their working life, once married, to look after the household and manage the family while hubby went out to pursue a career and earn a living.

Older folk will be familiar with this routine. Hubby comes home from work, the slippers are out, a nice cup of tea is waiting and the “misses” is busy in the kitchen preparing the evening meal.

Well, many of you will be aware this doesn’t happen in my household. Indeed, as a clergy couple, my wife and I live lives far from the stereotypical understanding of married life in the 1950’s. For us it’s a case of who is the most hungry when it comes to preparing an evening meal - or indeed, who is actually home!

And when it comes to washing, cleaning and shopping - it’s a case of sharing the tasks because responsibilities in our respective congregations mean each one of us is strapped for time!

I am sure my wife and I are not the only ones. Household duties, these days, are shared by most couples as each person gives expression to their particular gifts, pursues a career or simply works to pay the bills and procure some financial security in a world where there are lots of demands.

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Today's story concerning Mary and Martha may have something to say here. Think about it. Martha is rushing around, most likely in the kitchen preparing food, while her sister, Mary, sits quietly and attentively at the feet of their honoured guest.

Just imagine it. Martha is all het up as Middle Eastern custom demands guests are received with the offering of a generous, hearty meal. And its possible Jesus arrived with quite a large entourage as Luke mentions numerous times Jesus was followed by many people as he journeyed through the land.

So it's possible, indeed it seems certain, Martha has the right to feel a little annoyed. Mary, it seems, is renegeing on her domestic duties. Mary is not pulling her weight!

But we go on to see that Jesus doesn't buy Martha's angst. Jesus doesn't subscribe to the insinuation that Mary is failing in her responsibilities. Jesus does this as he responds to Martha's complaint concerning Mary's inaction with the words:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will be taken away from her."

Now, this could be construed as being a bit of a "put-down". After all, Martha is only doing what's expected of her. Martha is trying her hardest to be a good host.

So, what are we to make of this story? Is Jesus putting Martha down, indeed, is Jesus dismissing the idea that *"a woman's place is in the home"*? Is Jesus disregarding the time-honoured customs of the day?

Well, in a real sense, the answer is "yes". But it's more complex than that. Let me continue.

Firstly, Martha, in her deep loyalty to custom and her passionate desire to do the right thing, actually oversteps the mark and commits a "faux pas" herself. Martha does this as she bounds up to her honoured guest and interrupts him with a complaint.

Now, this is a "no-no". Women of the house would never interrupt an honoured guest in this way. Why Martha does this, I do not really know. Maybe she was trying to embarrass her sister. Indeed, it seems as though Martha "butted-in" as a means of "having a go" at Mary. And Jesus chastens Martha at this point.

But this is not real point of the story - and this takes us to my second point. For, you see, Jesus' rebuttal of Martha tells us something more. It tells us that real hospitality does not have to come in the form simply "doing things" for people. Hospitality is not just about preparing a meal or ensuring one's guest is well fed and comfortable.

A good example here concerns what we may do in West Epping. Offering food, putting on an excellent afternoon tea or providing a scrumptious meal is not the only, or indeed, the most "bona fide" means of rendering hospitality.

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For, you see, Jesus makes the point that Mary is also offering hospitality. And this hospitality is demonstrated, not by means of becoming busy, rushing around the room and taking on the massive task of feeding goodness knows how many people. Mary's hospitality is offered through attentive listening. Mary's hospitality is demonstrated through a willingness to give up her time, to sit at the feet of her guest, to open her ears to Jesus' voice and to learn from him.

Now there is a message in this for all of us. It means our approach to hospitality, our commitment to receiving guests and our desire to welcome newcomers into this community doesn't always have to be confined to the practice of providing food, busying ourselves with suppers or spending a lot of time in the kitchen - although I would never wish to underestimate the importance of all this!

For hospitality also involves opening ourselves to the other. Hospitality warrants us being present to our guests. Hospitality entails listening to and learning from those who come to us. Hospitality calls on us to stop, to spend time with newcomers and to not only inform them of what we can offer them, but to appreciate and learn from what they can offer us.

Now thirdly, this remarkable story of Mary and Martha really does put the spotlight on Mary. It does so because, in her listening and in her learning from Jesus, Mary really does break all the rules.

Women in Jesus' time belonged in the home. The idea of a woman coming out of the kitchen to sit at the feet of a rabbi was unheard of. Indeed, Mary's act of pausing, her move to sit and patiently and listen to a teacher such as Jesus was quite ground-breaking. For it was, in itself, an expression of discipleship. It was an outward demonstration of devotion, an open affirmation of loyalty and dedication to following that person.

And here, Mary does what women were not supposed or, indeed, permitted to do. She offers herself as a disciple of Jesus. Mary trespasses into what is traditionally considered to be "men's business" - and she does this to make a claim on Jesus as his disciple!

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Friends, that kind of move is pretty subversive. According to the traditions of the day it's even rather revolutionary. And Jesus, as we see, goes along with it. Indeed, Jesus encourages it!

There are many layers to this story. There are many learnings here for us. And it's this radical, quiet subversive move by Mary that strikes me most. Indeed, this subversive motive emerges right at the very beginning of the story as Luke tells us Jesus is welcomed by Martha into her home.

Here there is no mention of a man. Indeed, the idea of a woman inviting a male guest in without the presence of the man of the house was simply taboo. It was a "no-no." By doing so the somewhat traditional Martha is also breaking the rules. Mary is not the only dissident in this story!

Friends, here we encounter a common theme right across the Gospels. Jesus has the effect of turning things upside down. Jesus has the impact of reversing social norms, scandalizing the most respected institutions and calling into question the most sacred of "cows". Jesus does this by confronting established norms and offering a new way where people are totally free to be the persons God created them to be.

In Mary's case it's the opportunity to become a disciple, it's the chance to break free from the shackles that bind this sincere young woman to the confines of a suffocating tradition. And for Martha, it's a chance to get things into perspective, to learn that "being" is just as effective as "doing". It's an opportunity for Martha to move beyond a task-oriented perspective where goals, strategies and key performance indicators dominate life.

And this is what the Gospel is all about. Whether it be healing a person on the Sabbath or whether be breaching purity laws by touching a dead person, rubbing shoulders with a women with menstrual issues or healing a leper, Jesus takes on and challenges the tradition.

Indeed, whether it be socialising with proscribed groups like the Samaritans or meeting with despised people like the tax gatherers and money lenders, Jesus turns things upside down.

For, Jesus comes to bring about a new way of doing things - a way that is based on love. Jesus stands among us to institute a new way of being - a way that is grounded in the common good and the well-being of all people.

And the truth of the matter here is that the impact of Jesus and his teachings serves to liberate women like Mary and Martha despite the historical "hang-ups" that many parts of the church have held - and continue to hold - concerning the role of women in society and in the church. Indeed, Jesus comes to liberate everyone from the things that restrict. Jesus comes to free us all from the things that impede, confine and limit us from being the persons God creates us to be.

And that means the old slogan "*A woman's place is in the home*" really falls in obscurity as women of faith take their place in the world.

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Here I am inspired by such people as Joanne Rowling, a marvellously successful writer who began her career by adopting the pen name “J.K.Rowling” because she initially feared men would not want to read her books if the author was known to be woman.

Jo lived a tough life. She experienced domestic violence, a traumatic divorce and a gruelling period living in Edinburgh as a single mother on social welfare. Her first book in the Harry Potter series was rejected by twelve major publishing houses before being picked up by a relative small operator. And the rest is history. Jo Rowling is an active member of the Church of Scotland and her success is surely an inspiration to many.



Then there is a wonderful indigenous person who died some eighteen years ago. Shirley Coleen Smith was a Wiradjuri woman born on mission in Cowra NSW. Affectionally known as “Mum Shirl”, Shirley experienced racial discrimination within her church but remained strong in the faith as she served as a prominent social worker, an outstanding humanitarian and a leading activist in the inner city of Sydney.

Shirley was a founding member of the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service and many other organisations. She worked closely with Fr Ted Kennedy in St Vincent’s Catholic Church in Redfern and she also served as an advisor to the Archbishop. “Mum Shirl” showed a different way for Aboriginal people. It was a way that defied established systems that identified Aboriginal people as a people without hope and with no future.



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Friends, Jesus makes a difference. Jesus makes an incredible difference in the wake of racial stereotyping, gender imbalance or just plain prejudice in all its ugly forms. For, the story of Mary and Martha serves to inspire us to move beyond the constraints and the conventions that both define, restrict and narrow our vision.

Today, as we reflect on the story of Mary and Martha, this morning, as we consider the many layers and dimensions to this remarkable story, I believe the words of Saint Paul take a flying leap at us - and I share them with you now:

“.....if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation: everything is old has passed away; see everything has become new!” (2. Corinthians 5:17).

Amen.



John Barr

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- Who do you identify with in this story – Martha or Mary? Why?
 - Why do you think Jesus says to Martha that *“Mary has chosen the better part”* (verse 42)
 - What does this story say about hospitality?
 - What does this story say about discipleship?
 - In what way is this story “subversive” or even “revolutionary”?
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