

Women (and Man) behaving badly

Genesis 18:1-10a, Luke 10:38-42

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Last Sunday's cricket victory by the England team reminded me of another 'cricketing' incident that I heard about, which was to do with a family visit arranged between two lots of prospective parents-in law. As this was the very first time they met there was quite a bit of excitement beforehand, especially because the groom's parents came from a different cultural background. They were anxious to get things 'right' and not to let their son down. So they diligently practised the polite way of holding the forks and the knives and pronouncing their hosts' names correctly etc. On the day all went well until about half-way through the main course, the host stood up, and unceremoniously left the room and only returned briefly to say Good bye when the visitors were all finished and were taking their leave. It transpired that he left so abruptly, in the middle of the meal, because there was a 'crucial' cricket match being broadcast on the TV in the next room and he was not going to miss it for the sake of his guests.

Needless to say, the visitors were not impressed, they thought neglecting your guests in order to watch a 'mere' game of cricket was not acceptable in any society. I hope you noticed that I simply repeated the story and have not expressed any value judgement on it – I wouldn't dare in light of last Sunday's World Cup match!

Well, both our Bible stories today speak of hospitality. In one Abraham extending hospitality to strangers and in the other Martha and Mary are receiving their friend, Jesus. In both cases some of the characters behave badly and break the unwritten rules of social expectations of the time. Reading beyond the Lectionary allocation in the Genesis passage we find that Sarah's laughter at the visitors' impossible prediction, offends them. And as we'll see later, all the characters in the Gospel story also behave rather badly as they act against prevailing norms.

But there is a further similarity: in the centre of both descriptions there is a kind of ambiguity about the identity of the visitor. Abraham receives 3 visitors, yet the narrator introduces the passage with the sentence *The Lord appeared to Abraham as he*

was sitting by the opening of his tent, giving us a kind of theological interpretation of the event. And Jesus' visit to the house of Martha and Mary is told with the hindsight about the identity of Jesus, which could have only be known fully after the resurrection and after the unfolding events of Pentecost.

So, before we go into the domestic life of the two sisters in our NT reading we can already see the powerful message conveyed to us by these two biblical authors, who lived hundreds of years apart: *Practising hospitality to friend and stranger* is not only advisable because we might 'entertain angels unawares' (Hebrews 13:1), but in fact, it *is the time and place where God is most likely to show up*.

Now, if I asked you what this story of Mary and Martha was about, there would probably be a fairly unanimous answer: According to Jesus it's much better to sit quietly and listen to his words than 'fretting and fussing' about domestic chores. But if I asked how you felt about the story, I suspect the opinions may be more divided. Some of us, especially those of us, who do not particularly like domestic chores and quite happy to sit quietly in church may think it is good news. Others may feel a bit side-lined, thinking that the story is about women and for women, so what about men? Others may feel that the story is unfairly loaded against Martha, because where would the world be, if people like her did not do the necessary work. How could even Jesus accomplish his ministry without people like Martha and Joanna and Mary of Magdala and Susanna, who provided for his everyday needs out of their own resources and through their own service?

There may be some justification for resenting Martha's 'unfair' treatment. Right from the beginning this story was handed down to us as a story about '*Mary and Martha*'. In almost all the commentaries, all the references, it is always '*Mary and Martha*', giving priority to one sister over the other. Yet in the actual account of Luke, which is the only Gospel giving us this story, we find things the other way round.: '*Jesus came to a village where a woman named Martha made him welcome*', (v 38) in a sense indicating that besides Jesus, the leading role, the speaking part in this little drama belongs to Martha and Mary takes second place, as the (presumably younger) sister.

And the subtle diminishing of Martha continues in some of the Bible translations as well. When we come to Jesus's assessment

of Martha's activities, you would probably agree that calling them 'fretting and fussing' gives a different impression than describing them as 'worried and troubled', which are the actual meanings of the original Greek words used here. Fretting and fussing is pejorative, meaning 'over the top', and 'out of proportion'. Worried and troubled, at least takes the person seriously, even in the middle of a disagreement. Further more, in some versions of translation Mary is said to have chosen the 'better part', or the 'best part', pitting the two sisters' areas of service against each other, whereas according to the original text it is the 'good portion' that Mary chose, which is an OT expression specifically referring to the diligent study of Holy Scripture and in a broader sense, 'one's lot in life', or 'one's vocation'.

Of course, none of this really excuses Martha's bad behaviour as a hostess, just as Mary's behaviour of neglecting her traditional duties and acting like a male disciple was not acceptable at the time. True hospitality is about respect for your guests and drawing them into a private family quarrel, as Martha did may not have been the best way of practising it. Couldn't she have quietly called Mary to come and lend a hand? - we may want to ask. She probably would have done if her complaint was really to do with Mary. But, I just wonder if there was a specific reason why Martha took her troubles straight to Jesus. Could it be that her problem was *with* Jesus and the fact that he was not in her kitchen? Perhaps she felt Jesus was not seeing her, he was not acknowledging her efforts, he was not responding to her offer of love when she tried to provide for him the best way she could.

This sounds familiar, doesn't it? We too want to give the best Christian service we can according to our different 'portions', our different vocations. And we all know how much more difficult that becomes when we do not get the thanks, the acknowledgements, we feel are due to us. Now I know that this does not sound like a story about giant leaps of faith, more like about the small steps of every day faithfulness, which affect all of us regardless of whether we are men or women.

For this very reason we may wonder why this little domestic scene was included by Luke in his Gospel at all? Surely not because he wanted to make a point about Jesus' preference for religious observance over humble service. We have to remember that the sisters' story comes right on the heel of the Good Samaritan, where

service and neighbourliness carries the day in the face of inactive spirituality. Actually, this sounds more like an illustrated teaching to Luke's own church community, in which the spiritual and practical ministries may have got out of sync. Those who did the serving may have felt boxed in by their duties with the usual mantra: 'if we don't do it no one else will', so they probably carried on thereby preventing others to grow up and grow into caring roles while harbouring more and more resentment in their own hearts. In that context they did need to hear about Martha, Mary and Jesus.

Jesus does affirm Mary's counter-cultural choice but he also alerts Martha that she has other options too, she does not need to feel trapped by the ingrained social expectations she was brought up with. She can risk breaking the mould and if she can't find Jesus in her kitchen, perhaps she should get out of the that kitchen too. And when we think of the consequences of such a move, we may, indeed, be talking about a 'giant leap' of faith as well as 'small steps' of faithfulness.

Well, we don't know what happened after Martha's talk with Jesus, whether she was able to rethink her hospitality in order to listening to her guest as well as serving him. The practical work still had to be done. Would Mary and Jesus and his disciples offer to do the washing up? This is not as daft as it sounds. For if this story is really about an early church community, the solution of the problem has to involve everyone. They, together, have to make sure that, at least from time to time, the Marthas can stop and sit down and spend time with Jesus. And that the Marys would stand up, roll up their sleeves and get ready to follow their Lord by 'washing each other's feet'. My prayer is that the Spirit of God may shape us into this kind of community. Amen

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