

It's all about Women

Some of you may be wondering how I got to preach on this story of Martha and Mary. I have to say from the start it is not a story that I would choose to preach on. It is a story that I have always struggled with – knowing that I am sure that Jesus would have said to me what He said to Martha, and also that I hear these words as condemnation and difficult to accept – “Does Jesus not know these things do need to be done?”

As a teenager my mother would say to me – “Can’t you see that the washing up has to be done?” and over the years I have learnt in fact the answer to that question is - “No I didn’t” but I am happy to do it if she asked me to. But for her that was not the point. I was supposed to see that it needed to be done and do it without her asking me.

However, as I got older things changed and one day I realized – I could see that the washing up had to be done – but not just the washing up – all sorts of other things. The chair left in the middle of the worship space, which people went round and did not think to move. That something was empty and needed to be filled, the washing on the floor of the bathroom which no one picked up and all sorts of other things as well, possibly none of them important in the total scheme of life but would come to my mind, uncalled for often and just worry me till they were dealt with.

So how did it happen that I have this lectionary reading? When Nathan was organizing the church program in readiness for his time away, he sent out an email to “All the occasional preachers of SYCBaps” with the dates and the Lectionary reading for the day.

Quickly different dates were taken. I was not as fast off the mark as some and soon there were only 2 dates left – today and August 18th. I felt that August 18th would be OK but also thought perhaps I am supposed to take today’s date. Finally I decided to offer to do today. Nathan replied very quickly – I had missed out by 15secs and someone else had offered. “Thank you Lord” I said. But this was not the end - three weeks later Nathan wrote and asked “if I had not already half written the sermon for August 18th could I do July 21st instead?”

In all honesty I could not say I had even started to think about the August date – so I agreed and was stuck with Martha and Mary.

Since then any time that I had which was unoccupied, I would think on this story and snippets of thoughts would come to me like parts of a jigsaw puzzle, often unrelated to each other, but somehow seemed to be part of the picture I was reflecting on but I did not know how they related together.

Two weeks ago, Teash challenged us to ask questions outside of the story. This was something I was asked to do when I was doing my Welfare Studies – the first time I had to write 250 words only using questions which I found really hard but by the last time, which was over 1000 words it was a great way to explore something. So I did this - allowing my mind to go to places I had not considered before.

The second piece was a picture of the storm on the lake – with the disciples tossed about. The picture transfixed me and drew me in and suddenly the picture became my mind being tossed about, which was like Martha's, worried and troubled by many things. The storm came on suddenly and the disciples could do nothing about it and they had to awaken the sleeping Jesus – "Don't you care that we are about to die?"

The third seemingly unrelated piece came while I was reading a short article written by my brother John about our brother David who had recently died. In the sermon at his funeral our brother Peter had said, "Nothing David could do, no matter how far he went to hide, could separate him from the love of God. In later life he gained the most precious of gifts, an assurance of God's presence". John reflected, "It is a salutary reminder that salvation is really about grace not works."

Another part happened when for some reason I picked up a book that was written by John Fowler and in the book he spoke about changing the focus of the story of the prodigal son from a male to a female. I felt that I should change the focus in this story – rather than focus on Martha – look at Mary and see what she was doing.

Finally I read in a commentary on this story, the following words: "This short passage – it is only 4 verses – is capable of being misread in a couple of ways – firstly it is not about women", and instantly I disagreed because I think this whole passage is in fact all about women. In a moment I changed my focus and saw something I had never seen before.

There are only 3 named people in this story – Jesus and the 2 women – Martha and Mary. The fact that 2 women dominate the story would be shocking in the first century context where men often dismissed women as

marginal and the fact that they are named is also surprising often this was not the case.

It is Martha that opens her home to Jesus and the disciples and invites them in. This was in line with what Jesus had told the 72 disciples a couple of stories earlier when he sent them out ahead of Him. He sent them out without money or shoes – they were to greet the householders with “Peace be with this house”. Whenever they went into a town or house and were made welcome, they were to stay in that house and eat what was put before them. Providing hospitality and welcome to strangers was of vital importance within Judaism and the Middle Eastern culture generally – as Roslyn showed us in her story last week – hospitality was to be offered and also received. Jesus affirmed Martha’s hospitality by welcoming and receiving all she had to offer.

So Jesus and maybe the disciples (they are not mentioned or important to this story – sorry men) come into the home and await Martha’s continuing hospitality.

Instantly her mind goes into gear – top gear – Is there enough goat stew over from last night? Should be. She had baked the bread that morning but Mary could do another batch of her special bread. There are plenty of fresh figs, which can be picked. The chicken can be cooked up in time. The table was already set for tea – just need to add some more places. And so her mind continues to whirl as she enters the kitchen.

Everything will work out OK I’m sure. Everything was as it always was – until Mary did the unthinkable thing, it was not the fact that she had not fulfilled the role as a hostess in the situation – the role expected – this was bad enough – she did in fact the a really inconceivable thing – Mary went and sat down at Jesus feet – this simple action which for us would almost pass unnoticed was in fact highly contentious in that day’s society. This was the place and posture of a disciple of any teacher in the ancient world, so Mary in one act had broken the rules that reserved study and learning for males – this was no place for a woman – what was she thinking of?

Martha, as well as other males in the room, would have been scandalized by this action – what we would see as a nothing action, in that day was unheard of, breaking all the norms of Middle Eastern society. We could almost add – how dare she? – but dare she did.

This probably was the action that really caused Martha to demand Jesus do something about it. Martha did need help in the kitchen that was true, but she was possibly not just asking for that but demanding that Mary keep to the traditional ways of behaving and that Jesus do something about it – to make sure it happened. As the disciples demanded of Jesus when they were in the midst of the storm “Don’t you care that we are about to die?” What are you doing to do about this? Fix it. As Martha asked in the middle of the storm in her head – fix it.

Jesus did fix it but not how Martha imagined – He affirmed Mary’s action. “I can’t do what you ask”, Jesus said. “What she had done cannot in fact be undone and I will not take it back from her”. She has pointed to an alternative role for women, that of “disciple” – in the same way that learning and discipleship is available to men she has in this one act opened the way of discipleship to all women.

As John F called us to change the focus in the parable of the prodigal son to that of the prodigal daughter – by seeing the daughter as the one who left and became a prostitute - and how would we see the parable then? – so also in this story we have to change the focus from what Mary “did not” do but to what in fact she “did do”.

When Roslyn brought to us last week’s story of the Good Samaritan – she said it was a disturbing story – disturbing because it turns “upside down” our expectations of how God is present and active in the world. But His Kingdom is not of this world. The person who showed mercy and compassion was the outcast and the stranger. This also is a disturbing story turning upside down the norms of society for the Kingdom of Heaven does not operate by the same rules as the earthly kingdoms do. But as the Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3 v 28 “There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women, you are all one in union with Christ Jesus”

Back in the late 1980s I used to attend St Kilda Baptist in the evening. At that time they had no minister and I often preached for them. They also used the Preachers Society. This was a group that was available to churches if for some reason their regular minister was not available – they might be sick or away at short notice. The group provided a useful service, and were happy to go where needed. One day when I was speaking to Jim Barr – a Baptist minister – I said that I thought that I might join the Preachers Society since I was often used instead of them at St Kilda. There will be some of the older men here who may be smiling at this time - as Jim was. Finally he said

to me "You don't know do you?" "I don't know what?" I replied. "You don't know that they don't take women." I was totally amazed by that statement. I simply did not believe it. However it was true. In the light of this story of Mary, perhaps I should have turned up at one of their meetings and seen what they did about me. I should have taken the position of Mary and seen what happened. But I did not. Interestingly two days ago I heard the end of that story – but that is a story for another day...

So we discover the different roles that these 2 women played – Martha extended hospitality and welcome to those who came and with out this act the feast would not have happened. And then Mary by sitting at Jesus' feet opened the feast to all who were gathered there - all were welcome at the table. No one was "in" or "out".

John F also gave me a short piece about round 'tabling'. A round table needs work to produce - sawing, refining and redesigning – the redesigning of a narrow long church is painful for people and tables, as the cross was painful. The article said "Roundtable churching means more 'we" and less "me"- no preferred seating, - no "first" or "last" – no "in" or "out" - no "better" or corners for "the least". Roundtabling means being with, a part of, together and one - for we are all one in Christ Jesus."

Soon we will join together around this table – this round table - and at the invitation of Jesus eat and drink this Eucharistic feast in remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection until He comes again in glory. We are all invited to this feast regardless of anything that may divide us. So come and join the feast for "salvation is really about grace not works."

Sylvia Sandeman
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