**25th January 2015**

**Luke 10.38-42**

Washing machines are a complete mystery to me. I can understand a bit about a car and a computer but a washing machine – it’s beyond me. I just look at the control panel and read things like steam wash, stain remove, wash recycle and a mist of confusion descends on me. Maybe it’s my gender. Perhaps there ae things a man just cannot do because that is how we are made. Or that’s how we think we are as a man.

My wife, Debbie, whilst being proficient and highly skilled in operating the washing machine finds car maintenance a step to far. She has been known to put petrol in one, usually when a red light flashes brightly at her from the dashboard and the car begins to splutter, but checking tyre pressures, oil and water levels and anything else that involves lifting a bonnet or crawling on the tarmac is apparently a man’s job.

I am sure we are not alone in the division of labour and responsibilities – in our house we call them blue jobs and pink jobs – further gender stereotyping: if it involves bad smells, dirt, muck, oil, or grease it is a blue job; if it involves making nice smells such as baking and air fresheners, and making things which are reasonably clean cleaner – then it’s a pink job.

The jobs that don’t fall into these categories are open to discussion – or if we are being honest – argument.

There is an argument breaking out in this story of the visit of Jesus to the home of two sisters Mary and Martha. Martha falls out with her sister Mary because she is doing all the work of hospitality while Mary just sits at the feet of Jesus listening to him. Whenever we read this story I know a lot of folk have a great deal of sympathy with Martha.

When Jesus arrives at her home Martha works hard, doing her duty, being hospitable to the guest whilst her sister Mary does nothing. Most church folk find it a little bit disturbing, shocking or even annoying that Jesus seems to gently reprimand her and suggests that Mary has made the better choice of stopping her work to spend time just talking with him.

What’s going on here?

The blame game has started. Martha blames Mary for not helping her and being effectively lazy. We live in a work centred culture were people feel they have to justify their existence by what they do and compete with each other over how hard they work and consequently how valuable they are. It is a bit of a slur to be called a slacker or work-shy.

Most people have a keen sense of fairness – particularly if you have a sibling. There is nothing quite like attuning one’s mental perception of what constitutes fairness than having a rival sibling for your parents affections and benevolence. ‘That’s not fair he’s got more than me!’ ‘Why do I have to do the cleaning up when she makes the excuse that she has piano practice!’

We can all feel unfairly done by. Some will complain out loud and bring matters to a head –like Martha. Others, who may be afraid of conflict and expressing negative emotions like anger, will remain quiet but stew with resentment which at some later date may burst its banks sometimes with devastating effects.

Folks it is usually always better to be a Martha – deal with it, deal with it quickly and constructively: own your feelings…, ‘I’m feeling hurt because this has happened’…. Deal with it without making judgements or accusations that the other person has deliberately gone out of their way to offend you… give them space to say sorry and hopefully reassure you that they didn’t mean to hurt you and they are glad that you have raised this matter so that they can clear the air and restore friendship.

We know its good advice – but we all at times don’t do it – don’t confront the issue and back out through fear – but then the resentment festers and doesn’t go away.

Thank God for the Martha’s.

We are of course all different. We have different personalities developed and formed through nature and nurture. Our genes and biological makeup which are givens and our nurture and environment in which we are brought up, the cultural expectations that shape us, the family background and values and attitudes that mould us and tell us that this is how you should respond in such situations.

Just in this small incidence Jesus is helping Martha to reflect on who she is, to become more self-aware. Why does she react as she reacts? What is driving that? Why is this making her angry? Is her anger justified? How is she different from her sister?

Some commentators have used this story to contrast personality types. They say Martha is an activist. She gets her energy and satisfaction from activity – doing things, being practical, making a difference. Mary is contemplative – she enjoys the world of ideas, she is a thinker not a doer, she likes to reflect on meaning and significance, ideals and beliefs.

Martha will think that’s all well and good but if no one does anything all the guests will starve. There will be nothing to eat. Mary would respond by saying that without her all the guest would miss the moment to worship and realise that Jesus was here. You can be so busy, caught up in thoughtless activity that you miss the moment. Conversely you can be so lost in your thoughts, in your heavenly piety, that you are no earthly good.

There are many tools available today for understanding our personality type. I am hoping that john Burgess, one of our Synod Officers, who has led worship here on numerous occasions, may come later this year to do some personality workshops with us and see how our personality affects our spirituality – how we pray, worship, relate to God and follow Christ. I have found that sort of self-knowledge really helpful in my Christian growth. It often gives a vocabulary and an understanding to see why you act and respond and have the preferences for certain ways of doing things rather than others.

So for example some people like to talk out loud to think a problem through which can often bore the pants of those people who are more reserved and like to internalise the debate, think it through for themselves and then offer their thoughts. Some people are very intuitive – they can sense the problem or issue almost instinctively – but often they get it wrong because they jump to conclusions because they haven’t considered all the issues and the done enough research.

When people annoy you, don’t say it’s nothing personal – because it always is – the people who annoy us usually has the opposite personality type to us. Because they read the world and behave in the world in the opposite way to us – that is why they usually annoy us. But here is the great truth, which St Paul grasped with such clarity and vividness when he used the analogy of the body to describe the church. We are all different – but we are all needed for the body to function. The foot cannot say to the hand I don’t need you etc. We all have our strengths and weaknesses and our roles at play for the proper functioning of the body of Christ.

In church life it is always easy to play the blame game. We are working so hard doing this and that – what are the rest of you doing? Our situations vacant list is not, I repeat not, designed to play the blame game. I keep saying that we can only do what we can do – busy lives and hectic schedules and all that should make none of us casting judgements on how other people use their time. But of course, for a place to run some things need to be done, therefore the need has to be publicised and the hope and prayer is that someone will consider that they have the time to do it, and for that we will all be extremely grateful.

It is also important that from time to time we stop and contemplate whether what we are doing is the right thing to do. Senseless and non-strategic activity is not good. If we haven’t been looking out for the Lord’s guidance and word then we can end up doing things that we should move on from.

Last week’s church meeting we had to discuss about fund raising and the Corrymeela lunch, Should we hold a May Fayre as part of our fund raising? Should we continue as we have done for the last 40 years to hold a lunch to support the Corrymeela Community’s work for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the world? Should we keep doing it? The majority thought we should but if that is the case then hopefully that majority will make it happen. The church meeting was willing to give the May Fayre a miss whilst making the Christmas event more substantial. Every now and again you need to stop and contemplate what you are doing ?

Action and contemplation: work and prayer – the two sides need each other.

But the reply of Jesus seems to imply that Mary, the contemplative, the one who sits at the feet of Jesus, has chosen the better option.

Is Jesus prioritising contemplation and prayer and listening to him, over activity and practical work for him? Was Martha gently being told off for being distracted by the housework when she should have realised that now was the moment to sit at the feet of Jesus?

A prayer I came across picks up this point about being distracted.

*It seems to me that it’s not Martha’s serving that is the problem. Not her care for visitors and her desire to welcome them well. It is her distraction.*

*I get distracted Lord from the things that are important. Far easier to let everyone think I am busy than to really discern the things that matter and pursue them.*

*Mary must have been happy to sit at your feet and listen. But that’s a hard thing to do when others are bustling around humphing at you for not doing your share of the work – giving you the feeling that you are a malingerer.*

*Mary must’ve focussed and listened and had no distraction as she attended only on her Lord. Give me this singleness of purpose Lord. Let none distract me this day from being in your presence.*

We have been following the theme of Following Jesus his month. Following Jesus inevitably means listening out for him, learning from him, not assuming that you know what he wants for you, or know presumptuously ‘What would Jesus Do’.

If you were at the meeting about Same sex marriage on Thursday you will have been part of a discussion that was open and respectful but which made us all think and dig deep in our understanding of humanity, what is sinful, what is honouring to God and what would Jesus do. And whilst it may be doing our head in it also made us alive, because following Jesus is never dull. If you want a quiet life, if you want all your ducks lined up, if you want certainty, a list of rules to tick off – well maybe go to a more authoritarian church that will tell you what you should believe. But come here to this preacher and you are going to be disappointed and upset. For me, following Jesus is disturbing and challenging as much as it is an experience of grace and love, comfort and mercy. Hopefully you will have got that message loud and clear from my four sermons this month on the theme of following Jesus. We have looked at politics, forgiveness, gratitude and this passage about Martha and Mary today. Is it just about prayer and listening to Jesus, over unthinking activity in his name – or is there something more?

Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage pus his finger on the real shock, the real issue at the heart of this story.

He says, ‘the real problem between Martha and Mary wasn’t the workload that Martha had in the kitchen. That, no doubt, was real enough, but it wasn’t the main thing that was upsetting Martha. Nor was it (as some have suggested) that both sisters were romantically attracted to Jesus and Martha was jealous of Mary’s adoring posture, sitting at the feet of Jesus. If there was any such feeling Luke neither says nor hits anything about it. No, says Tom Wright, the real problem was that Mary was behaving as if she was a man.

In that culture, as in many parts of the world to this day, houses were divided into male ‘space’ and female ‘space’, blue rooms and pink rooms; and male and female roles were strictly demarcated as well. Mary had crossed an invisible but very important boundary within the house, and another equally important boundary within the social world.

The public room was were the men would meet; the kitchen, and other quarters unseen by outsiders belonged to the women. Only outside, where little children would play and in the married bedroom, would male and female mix. For a woman to settle down comfortably among the men was bordering on the scandalous. Who did she think she was? Only a shameful woman would behave in such a way. She should go back to the women’s quarters where she belonged. This wasn’t principally a matter of superiority and inferiority, though no doubt it was often perceived and articulated like that. It was a matter of what was thought of as the appropriate division between two halves of humanity.

In the same way ‘to sit at the feet of a teacher’ was a decidedly male role. ‘sitting at someone’s feet’ doesn’t mean as it sounds to us, being a devoted, dog like adoring posture, tongue hanging out and drooling, like the teacher was a rock star or film idol. To sit at someone’s feet was quite simply to be their student. To listen, to learn, to debate, to question, to think in order to become mature and yourself a teacher. This is not learning for learning sakes’. Mary has quietly taken her place as a would be teacher and preacher of the kingdom of God.

Jesus affirms her right to do so. Jesus values her not on some humanistic egalitarian ideal of women’s rights, but on the overflowing love of God for each and every individual. Mary stands for all those women who, when they hear Jesus speaking about the kingdom, know that God is calling them to listen carefully so that they can speak it out.

This passage, like the passage before it, the story of the Good Samaritan, is about the boundary breaking call of Jesus. As he goes up to Jerusalem, he leaves behind him, towns, villages, households and individuals who have glimpsed a new vision of the kingdom, and what it means to follow Jesus, and of whom life will never be the same again. May God grant that as we read this story the same will be true for us’.

Tom Wright : Luke for Everyone , SPCK