

Know your place

St Brandon's

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

17 July 2022

I hope you women know your place! Because, it's very clear from our readings this morning that your place is in the kitchen, or perhaps being responsible for wider domesticity. Martha in our Gospel reading is quite clear that that's her place, and also quite clear that that's where her sister Mary should be too.

And the same is true of Sarah in our OT reading. She is inside the tent, and when instructed by Abraham she gets on with preparing a meal for their visitors. She doesn't go out and greet them. She knows her place.

But in addition to domesticity, the other thing women are good for is child-bearing. The culmination of the meeting between Abraham and the Lord is that Abraham is informed that Sarah will have a son. Sarah knows her place in that respect too.

But then in addition to those two aspects of domesticity and family life, the other place for women is at Jesus' feet listening to what He said. That's Mary of Bethany's place, and it's permissible even if there are other domestic tasks that urgently need doing. Provided, of course, that she sits and listens. St Paul says, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 2:12). Mary fits the role; she knows her place.

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Well, having alienated at least half the congregation (and all of you should have felt uncomfortable to some degree), what's really going on here? One of our problems in approaching passages like these is that, with our 'enlightened' attitudes towards equality, we find ourselves indignant at the hugely patriarchal way in which such episodes are told, and the apparent demeaning of women that goes with it. And indignant as we are, we are then in danger of missing what might be beneficial to us – both women and men.

So as we go let's try to clear away what might be problematic to us with our modern sensibilities, and get to the real points of our passages.

Jesus says to Martha, "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 not be taken away from her". So is Jesus saying that all the practical things that go along with hospitality and looking after a household don't need attention? More broadly, is this passage advocating an annoying lack of appreciation for those behind-the-scenes heroes without whose selflessness church life could not flourish?

And I think we can say, with some certainty, that that's not the point of this passage. It wasn't long before the early church had to face the need to have people who could look after the practicalities of church life, and they appointed people (actually men) specifically to that task (Acts 6). And they weren't just anyone who could do the job, but "men of good

standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). And I think we can extend that to say that all of the behind-the-scenes activities of both home and church are not only necessary, but are worthy of dignified, spiritual service. Do most of them, particularly the menial ones, need to be done by women because that’s their place? Of course not. Can we learn not just practically but also spiritually from carrying out these activities? Of course we can. It is one of the beautiful things about Celtic spirituality that it looks to find and serve God in all the day-to-day practicalities of our lives.

But, can we then be in danger of thinking that this is all we should be about? Just get on with the practicalities, and leave the ‘higher’ things to others? Well, no. That’s Jesus’ point to Martha – that if she’s continually worried and distracted (and, let’s face it, probably pretty cross with it), then she will be missing out on something important, indeed something literally vital – “there is need of only one thing”. She needs also to find Mary’s place, and sit at her Lord’s feet as Mary is doing, and listen to Him.

Does she do that? Well, we’re not told so directly, but in the discussion that Martha has with Jesus after her brother Lazarus had died (recorded in John 11:17-27), she displays an astonishing level of belief and theological understanding. She says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know God will give you whatever you ask of him”. Astonishing faith. And a little later she declares, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:21-22; 27). Astonishing theological understanding. You don’t get that measure of faith and level of spiritual insight from just washing the dishes! Clearly, even if sitting silently, listening and meditating wasn’t quite her thing – she was quite probably too much of an activist for that – she had somehow created the space in her life to reflect on who Jesus was, and to come to a deep faith in Him.

What then of Mary? Well, we’re not told whether she did actually take her domestic responsibilities seriously, but the point of her story is that she had chosen the better part – not the only part, as we’ve seen, practicalities do matter – but the better part of sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to Him. And this had clearly had a deep impact on her.

Because it’s this Mary who, after her brother Lazarus had been raised from the dead by Jesus, and in the lead up to Jesus’s Passion, anoints Jesus’s feet with the costly perfume of pure nard and wipes them with her hair (John 12:1-8). It’s Mary (a woman), in contrast to His disciples (men), who has really taken in Jesus’s words about his impending death and resurrection, and realised the need to mark this and to prepare Jesus for this most sacred of acts. It is Mary that Jesus refers to when He says, “By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly, I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Matt, 26:12-13) – as I have just done.¹

¹ Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 tell the story and include these words, both in the lead-up to the Passion, but without naming Mary. John 12:1-8 also includes the story in the lead-up to the Passion, and names Mary (of Bethany). The equivalent story in Luke occurs much earlier (7:36-50) and again does not name the woman.

Is this way of approaching Jesus – sitting at His feet and listening to Him, and this way of responding in profoundly symbolic but also a very physical and indeed emotional way to Him, just for women? Of course not? Are there varieties of ways in which we can listen and meditate and respond, ways that might be more appropriate for us even if they're different from Mary's way or the ways others do it? Of course there are.

Let me try to illustrate all of this, and take us a bit further, by looking at our OT reading. I already hinted at the problems we might have with this passage because of the way Sarah is treated. She's in the tent. She's instructed to prepare food. She isn't invited to share in the meal or the conversation, or to be an active part of the hospitality that is offered to the Lord who appears, mysteriously, as three persons (and we're not going to discuss whether this is a pre-Christian glimpse of the Trinity!).

But if we can put all that part of the patriarchal system to one side, we are still left with the difficulty that Abraham and the Lord also discuss Sarah's impending pregnancy without her present. How dare they, even how dare God, when it's her and her body who will carry this child? (And yes, there are almost echoes of Roe vs. Wade here, and no we're not going to discuss that either!)

But, again, if we can put that to one side, we find a woman who is willing to conceive and bear a child, and a child, Isaac, partly through whom God will fulfil His promise to Abraham that he will become the father of many nations (Gen. 17:3-5). And as with Sarah, so we find with other women in the bible – most notably of course, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary the mother of Jesus. These women willingly give of their bodies, and have the physical and surely deeply spiritual experience of conceiving and carrying and giving birth to a child, and in so doing serving God.

Is this both messy, down-to-earth, practical and deeply spiritual experience of conceiving and carrying and giving birth one that both men and women can share? Of course not. Is the whole idea of being indwelt by the Spirit, and giving birth to the fruit of the Spirit something that women (whether or not they've had a child) and men can share? Of course it is.

Clearing away what might very well be problematic for us with our 'enlightened' attitudes, might then help us to take what we can from these passages. That we *all* can and should take part in the practical day-to-day activities of home and church life, and in them find a joyful service that develops us just as much spiritually as in any other way (Martha). That we *all* can and should never use that as an excuse to avoid finding ways, appropriate to us, in which we can sit at the Lord's feet, listen to Him and then respond (Mary). And that, even though we may not experience the physical carrying and bearing of a child, we *all* can and should willingly offer our bodies and souls to be indwelt by Holy Spirit, and to give birth to the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Sarah). In these ways, *all* of us should come to know our place.

Thanks be to God for these three women, who can teach us so much.

Amen.

