

Sermon at St Mary's & St Andrew's on Sunday 17 July 2022 by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

(Reading: Luke 10: 38-42)

Who does the housework? Two very homely biblical tales today: Abraham offering hospitality to three strangers who pass his tent – at least one of whom turns out to be God. But who has to do the baking? Sarah. And Mary and Martha – two ladies who receive Jesus into their home as a guest, then argue about who does the cooking.

It's too hot for heavy theology this weekend, so I'll start with a story, which is also about housework. Not cooking, but the chore that's every child's and adolescent's favourite: can you guess? Tidying up your bedroom!

This is a tale about a lad named Billy. He lived grew up somewhere in the West Riding of Yorkshire, sometime just after the last war. The tales I tell about him are firmly rooted in stories I heard about my family when I was young.

I have to give a trigger warning here. Some social attitudes were less progressive 75 years ago than they are now.

Uncle Ernest and Aunt Mary were coming to tea! Billy was excited. That meant someone different to play with. Little sister Mary was fine some of the time, but not all the time – and she certainly wasn't to be trusted with Billy's pride

and joy – a big clockwork train set that spread all over the floor of his bedroom.

Mum was busy all day dusting and cleaning and fussing around in the kitchen, and Billy amused himself in the garden with some mud and some tadpoles until the call came that he'd been dreading all day. 'Billy – come and tidy up your bedroom! It's a disgrace! You can't let Uncle Ernest see that.'

Grumbling, Billy went upstairs and quickly rearranged some of the piles of books, cuddly toys, crayons, clothes and railway track that were scattered all over the floor – and added a bit of mud from the garden for good measure – and then went back outside.

Half an hour later: 'Billy, I thought I told you to tidy up your bedroom! Get back upstairs and stay there 'till it's tidy.' But Billy didn't like being told again. He went to his bedroom, but he sat on the floor amongst the mess and sulked – for the rest of the afternoon. 'Right' said Mum, when Uncle Ernest and Auntie Mary were about to arrive, 'you can stay up here all evening and sulk then. Uncle and Auntie can play with Mary, her room is lovely and tidy!'

So, Mum had to explain to her brother and sister in law that Billy was in disgrace and out of bounds for now, and Mum and Auntie Mary went off to play with his angelic little sister. Uncle Ernest said he just wanted to have a chat with Billy's father about business matters, and the men disappeared into the study.

When it was time for tea, Mum went upstairs to see if Billy had stopped sulking. When she opened the bedroom door, she found him playing happily with his clockwork train set, and the messy piles of books and games and toys had ingeniously been transformed into tunnels, embankments, stations and passengers.

Mum was amazed – Billy wasn't usually this creative. So, Billy was allowed to come down for his tea, with a promise that, as he had made an effort to tidy up, as a special treat Uncle Ernest would come and look at his train set afterwards.

But as they went to the dining room for tea – where was Uncle Ernest? Dad didn't know – 'He left the study an hour ago, I thought he was with you!' Can you guess where Uncle Ernest was?

And then mum heard a sound upstairs, and rushed back up to Billy's bedroom... you've guessed, haven't you? There was Uncle Ernest, hiding sheepishly behind the door, winding up a clockwork engine! He had tidied up the bedroom, and he'd been playing with Billy all that time.

Now for the Theology. My life, and probably your life, can be an awful lot like an untidy bedroom. There are some good things in there – even as good as a clockwork train set – but there's an awful lot of mess as well. Piles of selfishness, dishonesty, thoughtlessness, fears and doubts and wasted opportunities.

And sometimes we do try to tidy it all up, but we usually just end up rearranging the mess. And we are ashamed, because we know God doesn't like it; and we shut the door and sit and sulk, even though we really know we need him to come in and help us. A voice in our heads tells us – sort out the mess first, and then you can present yourself to God.

But that voice is wrong. God sees us as we really are and he knows that we won't sort it all out on our own. But if we let him, he will come in and help.

Like any loving relative, God, our Father, wants to see joy in our lives, not pain and frustration and sulking, and he wants to be alongside us, helping to turn those untidy piles into something that's joyful and creative.

God doesn't want to be waiting outside the closed door of our bedroom, waiting for us to pull our socks up – he'd much rather be playing trains with us.

Now back to Mary and Martha. Two sisters who are obviously used to sharing the catering work when they have visitors. But this time of all times, Mary lets the side down. Or does she? Instead of helping get the canapés ready and keeping an eye on the roast, she's in the front room with the guests.

In Jesus' day, the catering was the woman's job. And not only that, the women weren't supposed to join the men in

the living room and listen in on their talks about religion. That was men's business.

So, when Martha goes off to complain that Mary isn't pulling her weight, she's probably not just upset that she's having to work for two in the kitchen, she's also embarrassed that her sister is breaking all the social rules by disturbing the men.



But Jesus is not telling Martha that hospitality is wrong, or that it's bad to look after your guests, but that real hospitality is not about how many exotic courses you prepare or how smart your tableware looks. It's about sharing quality time together – speaking and listening openly and honestly and without

distractions, especially when your guest is Jesus.

Maybe in modern words, Jesus would be saying to Martha, 'Stop worrying, get something out of the freezer and pop it in the microwave, and then come and join us here too.'

I think the story of Mary and Martha can be very relevant to our Church communities as well. It is very easy for us to get all worked up, like Martha, about doing everything properly and meeting expectations – and not actually finding time to sit down with Jesus and listen to what he has to say.

Martha wants to be a good hostess, she wants to give her best to her Lord, but before she can do that, perhaps she too needs to let Jesus give his best to her, to sit at his feet and hear his message of grace. For only as we learn to allow Jesus to serve us, can we begin to serve him.

Amen

IMAGE: Christ in the house of Martha and Mary. A. Mironov

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_in_the_house_of_Martha_and_Mary._A._Mironov.jpg