

**17 July 2022
(Bible Sunday)**

Amos 8:1-12
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

The document arrived in the post, in a very smart matt gold envelope. It was rather unexpected: it had been a long time since Gail and Brian had heard from Harold and Jean. Gail knew the envelope had come from Harold and Jean because their address was on a small sticker on the back.

The envelope contained a single sheet of heavy cream paper embellished with a thick border in the same gold as the envelope. The paper was printed in a beautiful flowing script, and read:

“On the 26th of October 1963 Harold Arthur Wisden and Isobel Jean Martin were married at St Margaret’s Anglican Church, Taihape. A reception was held in the church hall.

In celebration of their Golden Wedding Anniversary a dinner will be held on Saturday 26th October 2013, at the White House Restaurant, Upstairs, 232 Oriental Parade, Oriental Bay, Wellington. Pre-dinner drinks and cocktails will be available for purchase from the bar from 5pm; guests will be seated and dinner orders taken at 6pm. Speeches will precede dessert.

No gifts please, but save up your pennies so you can afford the celebrated cuisine of chef Paul Hoather and join in the celebration.

RSVP by 5 October 2013.”

Gail was very interested in the document. She scurried to the back bedroom, and from under the bed pulled out a battered old suitcase. It was filled with old photographs and other paraphernalia.

It was there that Brian found her an hour later, when he got home from the golf course. “What are you doing, dear?” he asked.

“Harold and Jean’s wedding. Taihape. 1963. Do you remember? No, no, you won’t remember – we weren’t together then. Well I can’t remember what I wore. I’ve found the order of service – they had “Guide me, O thou great Redeemer” and “Love divine” – but I can’t find a photo.”

“What’s brought this on?” asked Brian.

Gail showed him the impressive envelope and the sheet of cream and gold paper.

Brian perused the items. His reaction was rather different to Gail’s.

“Save up your pennies so you can afford the celebrated cuisine of chef Paul Hoather’,” he read. “That sounds like good advice. I must work on that.”

When she got home from work, Adelaide, their grown-up daughter who had moved back with Gail and Brian after a messy relationship break-up, was most interested in the document too.

“Well, I’ll believe that when I see it”, she snorted.

“What’s that?” asked Gail.

“Pre-dinner drinks and cocktails will be available for purchase from the bar from *5pm*; guests will be seated and dinner orders taken at *6pm*,” quoted Adelaide. “How can they be so sure it’s all going to turn out that way? It seems a *very bold prediction* to me!”

Gail didn’t really see what she was on about, and returned to the old suitcase.

Perhaps she hadn’t attended the wedding after all, but had been sent the order of service as a keepsake, probably along with a piece of the wedding cake. So where *had* she been? Maybe there was something in the suitcase that would remind her where she had been in October 1963.

Brian meanwhile was drawing up a spreadsheet to assist with budgeting. There was no harm in working towards a level of savings commensurate with affording a meal at the salubrious White House. It made a good target.

And so the weeks went by.

One day in early November the phone rang. Gail answered.

It was Jean. “I’m sorry you couldn’t come to the party.”

“Eh?” replied Gail, vaguely.

“Didn’t you get something in the post from me?”

“Yes, we did receive an item from you. Most interesting it was too. I’ve been researching the history behind it all; and Brian found the savings advice inspirational;

and Adelaide was a bit skeptical about whether the event would turn out as planned; but ... Were we supposed to do something?"

Jean was dismayed. "Oh Gail, you silly goose. It was an *invitation*; of course you were supposed to do something with it!"

It was not nearly as elaborate as a wedding anniversary dinner at a fancy restaurant, but another significant social occasion took place in Bethany about two thousand years earlier: at the home of Martha, a meal is put on for Jesus and his disciples. Martha is an independent woman – she may have been a widow – for, if she had lived with a husband or with her brother Lazarus the house would have been attributed to the family's oldest man, not to Martha herself.¹

Martha opens her home to Jesus and his disciples. As a Jew, Martha is anxious to ensure that her honoured guests feel welcomed at her home. In her culture, hospitality is about allowing the guest to share the sacredness of the family space. The woman's role is to do all of the cooking and food preparation.²

But this is not just about roles: it is also about domains. For while hospitality brought guests into the family space, this was still a rigorously divided space. "The public room was where 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.... 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 the two halves of humanity.

"In the same way, to sit at the feet of a teacher was a decidedly male role. To sit at someone's feet meant, quite simply, to be their student. And to sit at the feet of a rabbi was what you did *if you wanted to be a rabbi yourself*. There is no thought here of learning for learning's sake. Mary has quietly taken her place as a would-be teacher and preacher of the kingdom of God.

¹ Niveen Sarras, "Commentary"

² Sarras, *ibid*

And “Jesus affirms her right to do so.”³ Jesus is again breaking down boundaries: *all* are called to be disciples, not just those who hold a particular social position.

Today is Bible Sunday. And this Gospel passage presents several points pertinent to our use of the Bible.

The first is to note how easy it is for us to bring our perspectives and preoccupations to the Bible, and to interpret the Bible through their lens. So, for example, some have come to this passage with a feminist agenda; others have come to it with an emphasis on contemplative spirituality or with a view that worship is more important than service.⁴ The danger is that we find in the Bible only what we want to see, the things that confirm the point of view we come with; and where we find the Bible saying something contrary, we find ways of discounting it or ignoring it. So the challenge is to come to the Bible with openness, to find out what *it* says to us, rather than beginning with what *we* would say to it.

The second point is related: it is the importance of first of all reading the Bible in its context. Before we move to interpretation and application, we should seek to understand a passage in context.

Context matters in several different dimensions:

- We need to examine the context of a verse (or verses) within the passage it comes from, and within the wider context of the book in which it is found.
- We need to examine the passage relative to other passages on the same subject.
- We need to understand what sort of literature it is. The Bible contains many different sorts of literature, just as my sermon has so far. For example, my introductory story was allegorical, so we know (I hope) that we cannot take my story and legitimately extract from it principles such as The White House being the best place to celebrate wedding anniversaries (it closed in 2014, by the way!). In the same way the type of biblical literature will guide its interpretation and application.

³ Wright, *Luke*, 131 (emphasis in the original). See also Garland, *Luke*, 453; Bailey, *Jesus*, 193-194.

⁴ Wright, *Luke*, 131; Garland, *Luke*, 455.

- Finally, we have to understand the cultural, religious, social, etc context in which the passage was written and of the audience it was intended for. Today this point has been highlighted by need to understand the cultural background to the distinction between Martha and Mary.

While we are always seeking application for the issues of life today, and for the issues we personally face, such application must *follow* the understanding of what the Bible passage meant in its context. Otherwise, it has no anchor and drifts on the waves of our desires and fears. Similarly, reading for devotional inspiration is fine – so long as we don't lose touch with its original meaning.

The other big Bible Sunday point for me is that we should approach the Bible in the way Mary approached Jesus: we come to the Bible as disciples. To be a disciple is first to be a learner. But it is not learning for its own sake: it is learning in order that we too may disciple others.

Few will become Bible *scholars* – specialists. But all Christians should be Bible *students*. We should always look to deepening our understanding because we want to be more faithful disciples, living the Jesus way, going about God's business in the world.

We come to the Bible as guest. We come to the Bible as guest rather than master. We don't wander into the Bible kitchen, season the food prepared for us with ingredients we've brought with us, rearrange the courses to suit our palates, and direct who will sit where at the table. We come to the Bible open and ready to receive with gratitude everything set before us, trusting the Host to see to our needs.⁵

Jesus does not prefer the ministry of engagement with the word *over* service. Instead, Jesus does not want the service to be at the expense of the ministry of the word. Both ministries are important. The ministry of service should not absorb our

⁵ This metaphor comes from Eugene Peterson, "Pastor Paul", in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in honour of Gordon D Fee on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. Sven K Soderlund and N T Wright, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, pp. 286, 287 (italics original)

energy and time and so drive us to neglect God's word. The word of God motivates us to engage in the ministry of service.

Mary's choice to learn from Jesus does not negate the possibility that she went on to engage in service: we are wrong to see the two as incompatible ways where one must be chosen over the other. It is not only possible, but in fact highly likely, that Mary engaged in the ministry of service after spending time learning from Jesus – it is from Jesus after all that his hearers learnt of the radical dimensions of love of neighbour through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus describes Mary's choice as a good part that will not be taken away from her because learning God's word always inspires believers to serve.⁶

"Hearing is the precondition for doing, and action is the proof of the hearing."⁷

"To dwell in the heavens with Christ means belonging more deeply on Earth."⁸

I think a helpful metaphor for the Bible is that of the invitation.

In my little allegory at the beginning, Gail, Brian and Adelaide failed to recognize the document they received as an invitation. Gail saw it as merely history. Brian saw it as advice. Adelaide saw it as a foretelling of the future. But in reality all these elements were all subsidiary to its ultimate purpose – inviting them to *do* something, inviting them to 'come to the banquet,' inviting them to join their stories to the ongoing story of Harold and Jean.

Today, Bible Sunday, can we each resolve to read our Bibles more often, more reflectively, more deeply? Can we resolve this so that we really catch hold of both the invitation and the challenge; so that we can more fully appreciate the big story of God we're invited to join in with; so that, with Mary, we can become disciples better equipped and inspired to serve and to bring others into the kingdom banquet of Christ.

Amen.

⁶ The previous two paragraphs draw extensively on Sarras, "Commentary". See also Garland, *Luke*, p.455; and Wright, *Twelve*, 88-89, who also notes how the other two readings for today reinforce the importance of putting God's word into action.

⁷ Ludger Feldkämper, *Der betende Jesus als Heilsmittler nach Lukas*, p.185 quoted in Garland, *Luke*, p.455.

⁸ Ryan Schellenberg "Commentary"

Sources:

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