

Being a teenage girl is very hard. Everything and anything is embarrassing.

So when you make a social gaffe, it is crippling. I made the mistake of calling on my friend Jim without noticing that it was lunchtime on a Sunday. Desperate not to be a nuisance I resolutely refused all the food being pressed upon me by his mother, even though I was really hungry. Only much much later did I realise that Jim's mother was of that generation where they showed they cared by force feeding you.

Food and hospitality are very important, and sometimes a little stressful.

There are countless of hospitality in the bible, and we have had two such today.

What did Abraham do when the Lord appeared to him in Mamre? He rushed around, getting Sarah to bake cakes, getting the servant to kill the calf, and brought out the curds and milk. (Note that he had lots of people to help him.) Abraham does not know it is the Lord, as far as he is concerned it is three strangers. There are customs to be observed, there is a way to welcome strangers and Abraham obeys the proprieties. As did his guests – unlike me, they didn't refuse what was offered.

So why is it that when Martha is rushing around doing all the tasks associated with hospitality, and doing them on her own because no-one is helping, she gets a rebuke?

The situations are different. Jesus is among friends. This is a house he has visited often. He knows Mary and Martha and Lazarus well. Different rules apply. She should be enjoying the company, listening and making conversation. It is a question of priorities. What was most important at that moment? Jesus was not going to be staying for long, so it was more important for him to be able to speak with friends than for the house to be immaculate, and the food superb.

It reminded me of when we were first married and living in Clapham. We would often have friends to stay. We would all muck in making supper, or go out for a meal. It was basic, the flat was a tip, but nobody minded. Then, feeling rather grown up, we decided to give our very first dinner party, inviting people we knew from work, who were older than us, and who were used to this different world of entertaining. So the flat had to be cleaned, and we had to plan a proper meal. It was getting on for 40 years ago, but that day is fixed in my memory. We decided that for pudding we would make lemon syllabub, and we followed the recipe but it just wouldn't thicken – in the end we had to go out and buy an electric mixer. Looking back I can't believe the fuss. The tragedy is, all memory of the company and conversation is lost.

That kind of worry and distraction, the Martha syndrome, takes away the joy of the encounter, of the relationship. But it is a trap that most of us fall into from time to time.

All of us have an idea of the things we need to do even if it is not a list that is written down. Sometimes that list gets so long and so pressing that it cause brain overload, and you can feel as though your head is full of wire wool. When that happens to me, which sadly it often does, I know that I have got my priorities wrong. I am doing stuff that other people could do and probably not doing the really important things. When you are in that place it is quite hard to say 'whoa. Stop' and take time out to prioritise and even ditch some of the things that seemed urgent.

So what are the priorities?

Spending time with Jesus – that should be number one priority.

inextricably linked to that is the second priority – love, spending time on our human relationships.

The Old Testament is all about Israel's relationship with God. It is mediated through the prophets. Israel forgets, turns away, becomes interested instead in creating power bases and intrigues, and finally, when everything begins to fall apart, remembers again and turns back. For a while. For sadly it is a repeating saga. The prophets also stress the importance of the way in which we treat each other. These are the first two commandments.

The New Testament is also about God's relationship with his people, but in the gospels, this is through the incarnation, the expression of God's love in and through Christ. And again, Jesus stresses that love of God and love of neighbour are the twin foundations of the law. In the Acts of the Apostles and in the epistles, God's relationship with us is through the Holy Spirit, and again and again we hear the same message, love God and love neighbour.

What could get in the way of that?

It isn't just greed and envy and all the terrible things St Paul is apt to list. It is the basic chores. There is the washing to be done, the food shopping, mowing the lawn, walking the dog, the year end figures, taking the children to swimming lessons, visiting Aunt Maud, - all things that have to be done. They need doing, and if you haven't got a team of servant s running around after you, you have to do them yourself. Jesus in rebuking Martha is not saying never do any chores. All of these things can be acts of love, enhancing and enabling the relationship. . They can also be distractions, getting in the way, preventing the real contact of minds.

Life can be a chore or a delight.

If life feels like a chore, perhaps we are not spending enough time with Christ, perhaps we are not loving enough.

Let me end by reading you a poem entitled 'Welcome to the Real World' by Godfrey Rust.

I'm beginning to understand.
I saw a sign once
outside a church. It said
*Are you really living
or just walking around
to save the expense of a funeral?*

I didn't know
that Love is real life,
and everything else
is just a more or less entertaining way
of dying,

and I didn't know
that Love is like nothing on earth.

Love isn't what you fall in.
It's what pulls you out
of what you fall in.

Love isn't a good feeling.
Love is doing good
when you're feeling bad.

Love means hanging in
when everyone else
shrugs their shoulders
and goes off to McDonalds.

Love means taking the knocks
and coming back
to try to make things better.

Love hurts.
It's its way of telling you
that you're alive.

And the funny thing is that
after all
Love does feel good.

People say love is weak.
But love is tougher than hate.
Hating's easy.
Most of us have a gift for it.

But love counts to ten
while hate slams the door.
Love says *you*
where Hate says *me*.

Love is the strongest weapon
known to mankind.
Other weapons blow people up.
Only love puts them back together again.

And everything that seems real,
that looks smart,
that feels good,
has a sell-by date.

But love has no sell-by date.
Love is Long Life.
Love is the ultimate preservative.

I don't know too much about love
but I know a man who does,
up there on the cross
loving us to death.

Love is the key
to the door of the place
he's prepared for you
in the kingdom of God.
If you're beginning to understand
then welcome to the real world.