**The Diary of a Prodigal Parishioner 4: The Dreaded Wardrobe Audit**

Sue Young

*‘And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’*

Matthew 6:25

Yet I am very anxious about my clothing… the abundance of it. My wardrobe is full of items I seldom wear, and sometimes not even recognised as mine! The quote hits me hard. I cannot change my past. Years of indulging impulse buys of cheap throwaway fashion, manufactured mostly, but not always, in third world sweatshops. Even in the UK we have been, and probably still are, guilty of providing such appalling factory working environments. Only a few years ago, the fashion giants Boohoo ran a notorious sweatshop, well known for paying employees half the living wage, not far from where I used to live in suburban Leicester.

Yet I can change my future behavior about what I buy, and we all can.

I started Lent with a firm commitment to buy no new clothes for 6 months and to constructively recycle all that I own but decide not to keep. I remind myself that clothing manufacture uses more energy than all planes and ships in the world.

‘Get all your clothes out and put them on the bed,’ were the well intentioned, but scary instructions, coming from ‘The Conscious Closet’ by Elizabeth Cline. Simply doing that was an unnerving initial experience. My day to day outfits (odds and sods) spread across my bed, chair and floor, for me to view my profligate nature in all its glory. My carbon footprint exposed in real terms. Garment workers in places like Bangladesh and Haiti slaving away (word used consciously), earning only 1 to 3% of the sale price of the clothes they produce, their very young children often left with grandparents in villages miles away, their teenage offspring often working alongside them in these cesspits.

Another thought…. every time I buy cheap fast fashion I am casting a vote for the kind of world I want my grandchildren to live in. Not to forget the environmental cost of shipping clothes around the world from production sites to the western world. Here they are often unsold in charity shops and then shipped again to areas like the Atacama desert, where they are abandoned in clothing mountains and then burnt to release toxic chemicals into their virgin environment. Some textiles take up to 200 years to degrade. A sobering thought that the remnants of my cheap Asda t-shirt could still be polluting the environment when my grandchildrens’ grandchildren are alive.

My emptied wardrobe, cleaned out with lavender oil, which I am told prevents moths tucking into an eat-as-much-as-you-can-clothing lunch, encourages me to take a fair trade tea break. I am reminded that yesterday my cat, Misty, was delighted to present me with a tiny stressed out very, very alive rodent, which I think took residence under my bed. However, as Misty seems unduly interested in the piles of clothes, and seems to be currently searching for her lost mouse friend, I suspect it is now cosseted warmly under one of the piles. The tea break has offered temporary reprieve from the audit, but I realise that I cannot use this room and even go to bed until I sort this apocalyptic mess out. So, using Misty as feline mouse detector, I steer clear of any areas she is digging in and I give some order to proceedings using three empty boxes (as per instructions in The Closet book) to hold the sorted garments.

Misty immediately stops her search and climbs into the one designated for reuse/recycling. Articles named in bicycle terms (up cycle/recycle) can easily end up in many textile-recycling bins that are proliferating in Leeds. At this point it is important to stress the Zero Waste Leeds website, which is truly worth viewing and absorbing for all kinds of green advice, including a really useful map of recycling sites. It has a mass of useful information on events and suggestions, for beginners and eco experts, especially for young parents (school uniform swop) but which may interest many supportive congregational grandparents too.

I cover Misty in her box for old t-shirts and similar, destined for ongoing recycle treatment, as she dismisses that and moves into the giveaway/resale container which is rapidly filling up. This includes mostly good quality items that I have reluctantly designated too small; too ghastly; too boring; too short these days; too young looking; or never loved for various reasons; and these will go to charity shops of which we have many on our high streets. Others amongst you will decide to take advantage of the huge growing market for selling second hand, often as new clothes (eBay; Oxfam sales; Vintage - which applies I am told, to the clothes and not the seller/buyer). Meanwhile good quality reusable, resale-able items can go to designer agency shops such as those in Horsforth and Ilkley.

My last box, full already, is for keeping, designated for return into the now pristine, empty wardrobe. I may have to re-sort this as I sense my selection process needs a lot to be desired. Do I need four similar polar neck jumpers as spring approaches? And what possessed me to buy that imitation leopard skin cardigan in the first place? Misty, still in the ‘Out’ box, shows no inclination to continue the mouse hunt, which concerns me. A deceased rodent cannot be easily recycled. Meanwhile I have created an unplanned extra mound with no allocated box, for clothes that no longer, or never did fit. To give them away would be to admit defeat in my lifetime, calorie-counting war and necessitate cancelling a possible lifetime slimming club membership. Resolution, was as always, a compromise. Another box, an old toy box this time, to be housed on a shelf above the wardrobe hanging space, and frustratingly labelled ‘ If only … ‘

Posh outfits for weddings, baptisms and occasional funerals (for those requesting bright colours) pose a different dilemma. Four weddings (and a funeral) outfits (matched to my four children and late husband) can, I think, be sold on eBay, in the expectation, of no more weddings in the near future, or such special occasions. The unavoidable event left for my attention, where I shall be a key attendee, I shall not need to be dressed up especially for, as I hope I shall not be on public view, though I know of many who leave instructions for their favourite outfit for their last journey. Somewhere there should be an old leather skirt (survivor of the hippie era), which would do for this role. It may even fit by then! On this sensitive topic, fully combustible or biodegradable outfits for this final pilgrimage in my willow coffin, can be acquired on line, although the green website offering 10% off my first order, disturbs me. Where would I order the second one from?

Finally, to get back to the reality of my audit. I haven’t yet found the mouse and neither has Misty.