

Link Letter No.68 February 2016

Greetings to you all from Taiwan!

Another glass ceiling has shattered into a zillion pieces!

The women of the world are marching on; the world at last is our oyster. On Saturday, January 16, Taiwan elected its first female president. Taiwanese mothers can now proudly tell their daughters that even the presidency of Taiwan is within their reach. Of course, not everyone is happy given that politics is a divisive and messy business the world over, but hey, yes, another great milestone has been reached!

Actually, at about the same time as the election results were being announced on Saturday night, I was doing what everyone else at home in Sanzhi does on a Saturday night, and that is waiting for the bin men to come. Taiwan's bin men and the bin lorries (garbage trucks) provide an amazing service. I'm reminded of my time in the UK last year, when I discovered that all the houses in our little town of Sedbergh received a visit from the bin men each week, and on alternating weeks collected the recycling and the rubbish. You put the stuff out for collection in the correct wheelie bin in the morning, and hey presto, when you get home that evening it's all gone. Great service, even if sometimes you get home and find the wheelie bins gone too, blown away by the wind to destinations unknown!

But what has this got to do with Taiwan's election of the first female president?

Taiwan is a small and very densely-populated country, with a sub-tropical and very damp



The Sanzhi bin lorry



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climate, meaning that what suits Sedbergh is just not going to suit Sanzhi. Rubbish stored in wheelie bins for up to two weeks in this kind of climate would be a nightmare. Our little town of Sanzhi here in Taiwan covers about the same land area as Sedbergh but has about five or six times the population, so there'd be no room for wheelie bins anyway. Fortunately we don't need them as we have both rubbish and recycling collections five days a week: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. At 8:30pm on the dot, the lorries arrive and



December 23, 2015: carol singing with our student fellowship to visit Mrs Lu, our former church cleaner

as half – and mainly for economic reasons, of course. Though they're not very expensive, they are good quality bags so the cost adds up, and as nobody wants to spend money on bags for rubbish everyone tries hard to recycle. And it works!

A sideline of a business has sprung up in Sanzhi, because although collecting recycling is not a lucrative business, it can provide quite a few elderly people with a little income. So every bin night, from around 8:15pm, an elderly neighbour comes round with her trolley, collects up everyone's recycling and takes it off to sell. Sometimes she collects so much that it takes her several trips to take it all away. We have over 400 apartments in this complex, so on bin nights the main gate is quite a sociable place to be, as we all wait for the bin lorries, chat to the recycling lady and, yes let's face it, brave the wind and cold, straining our ears to hear the distant music.

Music? Yes, rather like the ice-cream vans in ye olde England, the bin lorries come along playing music to let you know they're here. Not just any old music, but "Für Elise" by Beethoven and "A Maiden's Prayer" by Polish composer Tekla Bądarzewska-Baranowska. Check it all out on YouTube in multiple videos. It always cheers me up to hear those tunes, and to know that come rain or shine, the bin men are on their way.

But what has this really got to do with Taiwan's election of the first female president?

Well, interestingly, in Sedbergh the bin men are exactly that, bin men. But in Sanzhi they are mostly not bin men at all, but bin women, sorry, bin ladies. The lorries

stop for about 15 minutes right outside our main gate; everyone throws in their rubbish themselves – and there's not a wheelie bin in sight!

Of course, like in Sedbergh, there are rules. In Sedbergh, different coloured wheelie bins or boxes are for different kinds of recycling or rubbish. In Sanzhi, it works by bags. Anything to go in the recycling lorries can be delivered anyhow, anyway, as long as it's clean. Food waste for pigs and stuff suitable for compost go into big barrels on the back of the bin lorry. Rubbish must – absolutely must – go into special pink rubbish bags, sold in different sizes especially for that purpose. Since this system was introduced, I understand that it has reduced rubbish in the bin lorries by as much



Christmas Day, 2015 Sharing the good news of Christmas with an early morning visit to our neighbouring junior-high school assembly

in Sanzhi are driven by men, but otherwise they are “manned” (“womanned”?) by women. On the rubbish lorry, the person checking to see what everyone throws into the churning edifice inside is a woman. If it’s not in a standard pink bag, she won’t allow it to go in. On the recycling lorry, those receiving all our paper, plastics, cans and bottles and sorting them all out are women.



St John’s University Student Fellowship says goodbye to two students, one (second left) on completing his course, and one (second right, next to me) as she leaves to do

Have you guessed what has this *really* got to do with Taiwan’s election of the first female president?

It’s the same on building sites and at road works in Taiwan. It’s normal to pass by such places and often see women pushing along great big heavy wheelbarrows full of building materials.

Of course, there are women in the UK who work in the recycling and waste management industry, on building sites and in road crews, but they are so few that they are kind of minor celebrities. Here it’s just kind of normal. And maybe in a few years time, I guess even having a female president will be kind of normal.

One of my fun classes...

... is a community English class, held on Monday afternoons for anyone who’d like to come. Most of the people who come are youngish retired people, mostly women, some from the church and some not (the photo, right, shows some of the group, plus a visitor). One of our activities recently has been a series of mock



Community English Class Group with a visitor

but very creative and true-to life telephone conversations on subjects like informing the boss you're going to be late, needing a day off and calling the repair man or landlord. The laughter generated by such seemingly innocuous subjects has to be heard to be believed!

It seems everyone in our group has many years of experience of dealing with wayward children, students, employees, and yes, let's face it, husbands, whose excuses for why things happen that shouldn't, or don't happen that should, mean that our mock telephone conversations in the class took on a life of their own. Even in early retirement, it seems that it's still kind of normal for husbands to expect their dear wives to cook a nice hot meal at the end of the day and to do most or all of the housework. But then, when we discuss it, it seems that it's also kind of normal for most women to prefer it that way, mostly because they don't trust the men in their lives to do such a good job as they can do themselves... ha ha!

Gospel values

I guess empowering women to even think about becoming president, or empowering men to even think about doing the housework, are not so different after all. It all comes down to empowering everyone. Empowering women to become president also means empowering the men to believe that a woman has all the capabilities to do the job. Empowering husbands to do the housework also means empowering the wives to believe that their husbands can do a good job, even if it takes some training, endless patience and some turning of a blind eye to the dust in the corner or the dirt on the tabletop. Believing that other people can possibly do things better, or at least as well as you, requires a certain humility, forbearance, tolerance, patience and encouragement – ah yes, and maybe lots of cups of tea to stay calm!

Certainly these are gospel values, and we don't have to read very far into the New Testament before we see Jesus launching forth into challenging people's views on men and women's roles in society and in the home. In fact by the time Jesus gets to the Sermon on the Mount, he's pretty much turned the world as we know it upside down. Being born in a humble stable was a pretty good start. I guess that's kind of what we're called to do too, turn the world upside down, and support our families, friends and communities in their quest to turn the world upside down too.

So here's to the women of the world working on bin lorries, building sites, road works, cleaning the house, and the few who have got to be their country's president – and to the men who've supported and encouraged them, and of course to all the men cooking the dinner and doing all the housework (even if they do miss the occasional dead spider in the corner!). CHEERS TO YOU ALL! All working together to turn the world upside down – YES!

A big thank you to all those who kindly sent Christmas cards and messages – here's wishing you all a Happy Chinese New Year, coming up very soon!

Love to you all,

Catherine

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