

## Sermon – Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2019 – 9.30 am

Do you remember that wonderful flower arrangement on behalf of the St. Martha's Guild at our Flower Festival a few weeks ago? The flowers were arranged in a dustpan, with brass polish adding to the display. A number of people expressed an affinity with that display – I think there was something about those very practical items which connected with our lives. And of course the St. Martha's Guild is named after the Martha of this morning's gospel reading. The one who serves, who is occupied by tasks, who gets things done. We often speak, don't we, about whether we are a Mary or a Martha. I wonder what you would say of yourself?

It is easy to hear this morning's gospel reading as a criticism of Martha, and by extension a criticism of those of us who are practically minded and are life's doers. But I want to remind us that it really is nothing of the kind. In Luke's gospel, the story of Mary and Martha comes directly after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Although our lectionary separates the two, it is so important that they are read together, or at least in relation to one another.

We are all familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is asked by the lawyer what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus says that the lawyer knows fine well – and he agrees, stating that he must love God and love his neighbour. But then he asks, "And who is my neighbour?" The response Jesus gives is to tell a story of a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho who is set upon by robbers. Left for dead at the side of the road, a priest and Levite walk past on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan – who as we know were disliked by the Jews – tended to the man, took him to an inn and paid for his care. When the lawyer recognises that the Samaritan behaves like a neighbour, Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." It's that injunction that is so very significant in the light of today's reading. When Jesus told the lawyer to go and do likewise, he could have said he should listen to some more stories, or that he should read more of the scriptures, or that he should spend some more time in prayer. But his command is clear – and it is all about action.

There is one other suggestion that Jesus was not intending to criticise those who are practical. As you know, our New Testament is translated from Greek. In this New Revised Standard Version, we have the translation, "Martha was distracted by her many tasks." The word that has been translated as task is the same one that we also use to mean service or ministry. In Greek it is the word *diakonos*. In the Church of England, ministers are ordained deacon before they are ordained priest, and we are reminded throughout that this aspect of service must remain central to our ministry. The history of the church suggests that what Martha was engaged in has always been highly regarded. And the hospitality she was offering is central to our calling as followers of Christ.

So if the intention of this morning's reading is not to criticise those who serve, why do we have it at all? Why do we need to hear about Mary sitting at Jesus's feet? Why does Jesus gently rebuke Martha when she suggests that Mary should be helping with the chores?

Earlier this week I met with a good friend of mine who has two young children. While one has settled well at school, the other has not, and over the course of the last year or more my friend has been in and out of school to discuss his behaviour and progress; she has had countless medical appointments as well as visits from social workers; for some periods of time she has had to have her child at home because he hasn't been able to attend school. Her life has been filled with many tasks. Many, many tasks.

This might sound like an extreme example, but it is probably true for all of us that our lives have contained periods of time when being active and doing things hasn't felt like a choice, but rather a necessity. Trying to juggle work and children; looking after younger and older generations; maintaining a home and garden. All of these things give us plenty of things that need doing.

But during the course of the conversation with my friend, she brought up the idea of going on a pilgrimage. Taking a week or so to walk somewhere – perhaps a part of the Camino, or an equivalent. For her, this is not something she can just choose to do at the drop of a hat, but she has a supportive husband, and knows that with proper planning, getting a week away is possible. And significantly, she knows that it could make a real difference. That having time and space to stop, to think, to breathe is something worthwhile.

And I wonder whether this might help us to understand why we need to hear the story of Mary and Martha. It is not to criticise Martha, but it is to recognise the importance of Mary and her choices, too. Both characters challenge the norms of the society in which they lived. In Luke's gospel there is no mention of Lazarus, so the suggestion is that Martha was the head of the household, offering hospitality to a man. Mary goes a step further and sits at his feet, seeking his company and wanting to be taught by him.

When the lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, the answer was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." The parable of the Good Samaritan answers the question about what it means to love our neighbour as ourselves. But that does not mean that loving the Lord our God is any less important. And the story of Mary and Martha shows us how we might do that.

There is nothing wrong with being active; with being a doer. But I wonder if we sometimes make a virtue of it to the exclusion of anything else. Our society prizes busyness above all else, and I wonder why. Of course it is partly because there is a lot to do. But is that the whole story? Might it also be that we are just a little scared of what would happen if we stopped? With what would happen if we, like Mary, sat at Jesus's feet and listened?

Each one of us has so much to give, in our various ways. But one of the lessons of loving the Lord our God is that we also have much to receive. There can be as much virtue in receiving as in giving, particularly where we take the time to receive God's love and wisdom. Loving God and loving neighbour and two halves of the same coin. We can only really know what it means to love our neighbour by continuing to receive love from God. By continuing to spend time with God, reflecting on those things we have done and considering those things that we will do.

Perhaps that is the real message of that beautiful flower arrangement in the dustpan at our Flower Festival. That those who are engaged in active tasks also need to be able to reflect on the beauty of the world and the gracious love that we receive from God.

Amen