

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Seventh Sunday after Trinity 2010
By Chris Palmer

Luke 10:38-42
18 July 2010

“Poor old Martha. She’s so hard done by. She’s the one who’s actually doing the work. If she wasn’t running round getting tea, Jesus and Mary wouldn’t have anything to eat. When we read this story, we have to be careful not to belittle what Martha does. After all, if it wasn’t for people like Martha where would we be? Martha is all the people who organise parish events, or school fairs, or office parties; she is the Mum or Dad keeping the home running and delivering children to their play dates. She’s the one the vicar comes to find when something needs doing. Jesus doesn’t really mean that quietly listening to Jesus is more important; he simply means that we mustn’t let our jobs overwhelm us or irritate us.”

Well, how often have I heard explanations of this story like that. People are vaguely embarrassed by the story and by Jesus’ words, and they want to assure all the Marthas that they really matter, and we want to feel affirmed for the Martha in ourselves, the endless hours and days that we put into making sure our home or church or school or work run right.

Well I’m not going to preach that kind of sermon at all this morning. Rather I want to ask what makes us react in this defensive way. Why do we want to buck the straight forward sense of Jesus’ words? Will we dare, instead, to let Jesus challenge us?

And if you’re feeling like you want to jump to Martha’s defence – or even if you’re not – I want you to start by thinking back over the past week. How many hours have you spent being like Martha? How long absorbed with tasks, chores, jobs, errands – with busy-ness? And now ask ‘How many hours you’ve spent being like Mary?’ The reading says she was ‘sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to what he was saying.’ This is not just relaxation, and it’s certainly not collapsing on the sofa exhausted at eleven o’ clock at night – that’s just Martha at the end of her energy. ‘Sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he was saying’ is wakeful attentiveness – to God, friends, family; it needs our best effort and concentration. So, how long as Martha and how long as Mary?

Well I bet for a good number of us the time spent being Martha will come out somewhere in excess of 50 hours in the week; and the time spent being Mary will be something less than 50 minutes. And if that’s the case – or anything near it – then we need this story, and we need to stop trying to explain why Martha’s hard done by, and start listening to Jesus instead.

We are addicted to busyness. We tell ourselves it’s all essential, and the undone tasks weigh on our minds and torment us. Any real times of stopping leave us with a slight lingering feeling of guilt. Or our times of prayer or just sitting down in a properly wakeful moment with our family are accompanied by a mind full of the tasks or anxieties outside this moment.

Listen to Jesus’ words: ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.’ ‘Worried and distracted’: it seems to sum up the problem really. We are assailed by anxieties, by a nagging sense that things might go wrong. Or we are distracted; in other words, our focus is not on the moment and the place in which we find ourselves. Nervous tension is probably the biggest inhibitor to prayer – and probably the biggest inhibitor to healthy relationships in the rest of life too.

A good way to learn overcome this nervous tension is to learn to be aware. We can use awareness exercises like the one I used with the children earlier [sit and notice the sensations in your face]. Or even more focussed than this, last Maundy Thursday we had a bunch of teenagers for a night of activity in our church hall in my last church. At midnight we had a time of worship and started with a exercise I got from Anthony de Mello, an Indian Jesuit: sit and just notice the sensations in your upper lip – between your mouth and your nose. They did it for 10 minutes I think. At first it's frustrating, but stay with it, and it focussed the attention wonderfully – and allows the things that distract to fall away.

And then by way of contrast with the 'many things' that distract Martha, Jesus says this: 'there is need of only one thing'. What is the one thing that Martha needs? I remember when I was a graduate student hearing a friend of mine give a short paper on this verse. The Greek literally means 'There is need of one'. And he argued that it is a reference to God. The idea that God is 'one' is rooted deep in the Jewish psyche. Day by day Jews repeat the Shema, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one.' So for Jesus to say 'There is need of one' is to say 'What you need is God'. And the 'many things' that distract Martha have become a form of idolatry, of worshipping things other than the one true God. Whereas sitting at the feet of Jesus is to give our attention and adoration to God. It is in Jesus that God is known; he is Emmanuel 'God with us'.

Well I have no idea whether that interpretation of the passage is correct. But it obviously appealed to me at the time for me to remember it 15 years later – and I offer it to you now.

And then the final phrase: 'Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' There's again been a liberty taken with the translation. Literally it means that Mary's chosen the 'good part' or the 'good portion'. This idiom, 'this is good, that's bad' is often used in the Bible for 'this is better, this is worse' – but we don't need to be bound by this meaning. It can be simply an affirmation, without comparison, that what Mary has chosen is 'good'. And Martha – we – need simply to acknowledge the goodness of sitting at Jesus feet, without judging the value of Martha's busyness in with the bargain.

And remember the words, 'the good portion'. Eugene Peterson in his translation of the New Testament, *The Message*, plays with those words in a good way: 'Mary's chosen... the main course.' And again, I think that helps. It's not about comparison with the other courses, but Mary knows where the real sustenance is. By contrast Martha likes snacking on the starter and the pudding even before she's sat at the table, and she's too full to enjoy the food that matters.

Make a resolution to take time this week for God and others – a bit each day. Build the rest of your chores around the time you give to this attentiveness, rather than fitting prayer and time with family into the gaps. It's a good stewardship principle: God doesn't deserve what's left over when we've used up our time or energy or money on all the other things in life; he deserves the first bite. And once you've given the time and attention you need to attentively being with God and others, there will still be enough for the jobs too.