

Year C Proper 16

Genesis 18: 1-10a

Colossians 1: 15-28

Luke 10: 38-42

The better choice

When I read through the gospel reading for today about the different ways in which Mary and Martha chose to respond to Jesus' visit to their house, I was initially left feeling uncomfortable.

Martha was being hospitable. It was Martha who greeted Jesus when he arrived; the gospel reading is clear that she welcomed him. I imagine she then immediately set about the kitchen and was working hard to make sure food and drink was prepared for their guest.

We all know that the ethic of hospitality was very strong in the culture of the Middle East. We only have to refer back to the OT reading to see that. Abraham gave hospitality to the three strangers who appeared without warning near the entrance to his tent, by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham asked Sarah to prepare food, cakes in fact, whilst he went and selected a healthy calf to be slaughtered by one of his servants and took curds and milk to the visitors.

So, wasn't Martha just like Abraham, following what the traditions and the culture in her time and place demanded of her?

And wasn't Mary behaving in a counter-cultural way? She was sitting at the feet of the teacher; normally only something that men would do. A shocking way to behave, surely?

Is Jesus telling Martha that being active, providing generous hospitality, is wrong? If so, then this church we are in, and many over the ages would be in trouble.

Every week, as I sit in my study, answering emails, drafting letters and papers, praying about and writing sermons, there is a steady progression of Martha's who pull up in the church car park, and disappear inside church. They clean, they polish, they arrange flowers, they prepare the hall and work in the kitchen. And the vast majority of these invaluable helpers, these Martha's are women. Our church relies on many people choosing to be busy and active.

Also, what crossed my mind when I read this gospel reading was, where were the disciples? Could not they have relieved Martha of her chores, to let her go and sit at Jesus' feet, or at least have an nap? That really would have been turning the world upside down! And so provocative...

Anyway, I am straying from the point.

Was Jesus urging Martha to abandon action and to choose contemplation as the only way to be? No, not quite that.

Jesus was asking Martha to choose to do what was the right choice at that particular time and place. In this case, it was to be present with Jesus and give him her full attention.

Jesus sees that Martha isn't just busy, she is worried and distracted. Distraction means to be separated from or dragging apart something that should be whole. So, being distracted means she was not fully in the present moment, and definitely not present in the room with Jesus. Martha's state of mind was all over the place, attention not settling on anything for very long or her attention was divided across so many different things. It definitely wasn't wholly focussed on Jesus.

Martha's state of mind is one I am familiar with. I know I can find it hard to focus, to shut down all the noise and chatter in my head. So I sympathise with Martha, and I guess I might also have not given Jesus my undivided attention.

Martha was clearly annoyed with and resentful of her sister – isn't that so true of families? Because she had got annoyed – she probably did want to hear what Jesus had to say, to hear about his latest exploits, and to enjoy his company as he told his stories – Martha shows her frustration. She questions Jesus' love for her over her sister, "Do you not care that my sister left me to do all the work by myself". She is also focussed on herself. She then, uses what in dispute resolution parlance is called 'triangulation': involving another person in your complaint. She asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her.

Boy, Martha was quite upset. And as I have said, I can see why.

Jesus's response may not be how a trained mediator would have approached this sibling dispute, but it does give us an important lesson.

Jesus notes how distracted and worried she is; how she is not able to make a rational decision, and how she is unable focus on what is important. Unfortunately, Jesus may just have rubbed salt into the wound by saying that her sister, Mary, chose the better part. Ouch! That must have hurt.

I wonder when you heard the gospel being read did you immediately identify with Mary, and thought 'that is what I would have done', because you know that Jesus says it's the better choice? Some of us might be kidding ourselves if we thought that. I suspect more often than not I would have behaved like Martha? What about you? Can we admit that we more often place ourselves in this gospel, at the feet of Jesus, not in the kitchen preparing food, maybe banging pots and pans in our frustration with our sister's indolence?

But also being distracted because we yearn, we hanker, to sit at the feet of Jesus, just like Mary, and to take in His every word, to delight in them, and be inspired by what he has to say?

We can either view Jesus' response to Martha, and to us, hearers of this gospel story, as an admonition or as an invitation.

An invitation to give Jesus our undivided attention, to be wholly in His presence, to delight in his love for us. Mary chose the better option, at that particular time and place. To put aside all the things that distract us and cause us to worry, and spend time focussed on Jesus.

I admit that I can easily be just as distracted as Martha was. I admit I can be too busy, and when there is a lot to do, and I push myself to complete tasks, it becomes even harder to justify setting aside time for God the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And yet, I know that the busier I get the more I need to carve out time, to spend it in silence and to calm the busy-ness of my mind and know that Jesus is just waiting for those moments to meet with me.

For Jesus is always waiting to meet us, and when we can come before Him, with a stilled and hushed mind, with distractions and worries set to one side, we are able to be fully present before him, just like Mary chose to do.

For me, there is a catch 22 in all this. The busier I am the less time I have to stop, but actually the busier I get the more I need to stop and find peace at the feet of our Lord and saviour.

As I said I get uncomfortable reading this story; but I think Martha represents so many of us, and yet Mary represents a side that many of us need to nourish and encourage. We do need both action and contemplation in our lives; this gospel story supports that, but it

does make clear that there are times when we need to give our relationship with God our full attention.

Mary chose the better part: at that time it was to focus on Jesus.

May we all find time to come into the presence of Jesus with our whole being. Who might you find that time?

May we all yearn to be with Jesus like I believe Martha did, and like Mary, find a way to be in His presence at the right times.