

Reflection for Sunday 17th July 2022

Col 1:15-28 & Luke 10:38-42

I begin today by asking myself if I really do give Jesus the attention he should have if I am to live my life well. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians emphasises right from the start that it is all about Jesus. The letter goes on to describe the kind of life that followers of Jesus should be living but living that sort of life starts when we really get to know just who Jesus is. Paul therefore begins his letter by emphasising the essence of the person of Jesus. Jesus is one with God and rules over all creation. All created things came to be through him and through him, all things (that is the whole of creation, not just people) are reconciled with God. If then we are to live as God intended, we need to give time to Jesus and be attentive to what he says to us.

And with this thought in mind, I will turn to the reading from Luke's gospel. I imagine that many clergy in the Exeter Diocese felt quite pleased when this reading came up in the lectionary, for at the recent Diocesan Clergy conference we gained some very helpful insights into this passage from Bishop Emma Ineson. Bishop Emma's reflections focussed mainly on Mary, who we find in this short account sitting attentively at Jesus' feet, defying all the social rules of the day, which dictated that women should be elsewhere. I think though, that this passage is not primarily about Mary but her sister, Martha. Mary is mentioned in the account but to my mind Martha is the subject of the account.

I actually think that Martha has often been judged rather unfairly as a result of this particular episode. We look at it and, in our very human nature, feel the need to compare Martha with Mary, usually concluding that Mary is the more worthy disciple. That is not though what Luke is implying here. He is simply using the conversation that Jesus has with Martha to make a point about discipleship. So, before

we start jumping to conclusions about Martha's godliness relative to Mary, we should remember that both sisters and their brother Lazarus (who we might remember, Jesus raised from the dead) were close followers of Jesus and all three were deeply loved by him (John 11:5).

I'd like then, to put forward the thought that Martha lovingly served Jesus in a way consistent with the person that she was. It was not in her to take the risks that Mary took (according to John's gospel it was Mary who poured seriously expensive perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair) - John 11:2 & John 12:1-10. Mary chose to express her love and worship of Jesus in extravagant ways. That was her gift, but Martha's gift was different. Martha expressed her love and devotion through acts of service and her sense of responsibility. Though we are not told, I'm guessing that she was the older sister for it seems that this is often the way of older siblings. The important thing to notice here is that it is Martha who offers hospitality to Jesus and his companions. Luke states, 'as Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.' Whether Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus occupied the same house we don't know, but it is Martha who Luke tells us, 'opened *her* home' to him. Martha's gift and calling was one of hospitality, yet that strength in her character was (as this story demonstrates) also an area for potential weakness. As I reflect on this, I'm imagining other occasions, not reported in the gospels, where Jesus calls Mary aside and tells her to be a little more aware of the feelings of those around her. For her too, the strengths seen here, could in other situations, be weaknesses.

For now, though we must turn to Martha and the gentle correction that Jesus gives her. And it is gentle. Jesus is not scolding, judging or tut-tutting but holding out the possibility of another perspective, a way, on this occasion, modelled by her sister, Mary.

For me, the striking phrase in the passage is that Martha was ***distracted*** by all the preparations that had to be made. The problem was not necessarily the preparations in themselves but the fact that they distracted Martha from being fully attentive to Jesus.

Now there are all sorts of reasons why Martha might have been distracted. I wonder if she was prone to overpreparing and overproviding. There are several motives she may have had for doing so. When someone has a heart that cares for people it is easy for them to care a little too much. In some sense this is to do with pride. When we have a gift or talent, we do tend to want people to know it. We also like the reassurance that we are needed and relevant, useful or even indispensable to those around us. We care too about what others might think. Was Martha worried about what Jesus and his companions would think of her hospitality?

Aside from pride there is also fear, although on reflection these two traits may well be one and the same. In our brokenness, human beings instinctively fear criticism. Some of this is understandable, particularly in the present day where stinging criticism and public insult are more commonplace. For Martha, the fear of criticism could have been a factor that pressured her into submission to social norms and the expectations of those around her. This is where Mary had no problem. She was quite happy to defy the rules even when it risked causing upset to her guests, including those with status and influence.

We can speculate on Martha's predicament here but Jesus' take on the situation is that she was worried and upset about many things. Whatever the underlying motives, she was worrying about what she felt had to do and upset that her sister did not appear to be in any hurry to help out. Worry is indeed distracting. Try having a meaningful conversation with someone when you are carrying worries and see how your listening skills check out. Resentment too is distracting. Martha could see that Mary was getting the better deal.

Martha, I think, would have loved to have sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his words, but somebody had to think about the preparations, didn't they? It reminds me just how often we translate our own sense of what is right onto other people. We expect them to obey our rules, and then get angry when they seem to benefit from renegeing on what we think should be their responsibilities. Anger is a very good distraction to hearing the word of God.

Martha as Jesus observes, is indeed worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed. Martha is too focussed on the unimportant. Sadly, so are many of us. There are few things that really matter, yet it is hard for us to prioritise those things above the many things that appear important, but in the big scheme are not. Many of us recognise that we really should pay more attention to the Jesus of Colossians 1 but find ourselves being distracted by other commitments. In order to be attentive to Jesus and to other important people in our lives we need to declutter. In the end we do as Jesus makes clear to Martha, have a choice. It will often be a hard choice. It may well conflict with our sense of responsibility, the expectations of others or our reluctance to upset the apple cart. It is a choice that does come at a price, but it is a choice that we have to make.

To conclude, we must not take this story to mean that we should never do anything apart from pray. Jesus often sent his disciples off to carry out acts of ministry, and like Martha we must remain true to who we are. Commitment to service is laudable, but not when it gets in the way of our relationship with Jesus. On this occasion, it was Mary who had chosen what is better. The power of Jesus' words in her life would not be taken away but would stay with her, to lead and guide her in the ways of God's kingdom.