

Proper 11 C, 2019, Genova with Confirmations

Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 10.38-end

Friends this wonderful little story of Martha and Mary which is our gospel for today despite being such a short story has many interpretations. Some people, mostly women, get annoyed at the story because they think that Jesus is making an unfair judgement, putting down busy Martha and taking the side of lazy old Mary! But people have understood this story in a variety of ways. I want to speak to you this morning about three different approaches to the story. Two of them you may have heard before; they are quite traditional interpretations. The third one is a bit more radical, and that is actually the one that I like.

First of all there is a very old interpretation that the story is about the difference between the active life and the contemplative / prayerful life. So Martha, concerned about all the details of hospitality, running around the kitchen preparing dinner, she is symbolic of the active life. She's like all those in the life of the church who are busily engaged in active ministry and service. Mary on the other hand, sitting quietly at the feet of Jesus, listening, represents the contemplative / prayerful life. She is like others in the Church, monks, nuns, all those who spend much time in prayer, quietly contemplating God and our faith. So when Jesus turns to Mary and says you have chosen the better part, it can be understood to mean that Jesus is giving greater value to the quiet, prayerful life over the busy and active life of service.

Now, whether or not Jesus accords greater value to the quiet, prayerful life over the active life is an interesting question. However we do know from the biblical tradition that *listening* should come before *acting*. Jesus may be stressing that the active life must follow-on from prayerful listening to the word of God and the teaching of the church. The great figures in the Bible seem to have a moment of listening when they asked themselves "what is the Lord saying to me?" Once we have a sense of the answer to that question then we are ready to act in a way that is in line with God's will. What gets people in trouble sometimes is that they act without listening.

Now this is a very important principle for us today. We are not living in a society that values the quiet, prayerful life. Society is much more Martha orientated. The modern world prefers people who are busy and bustling and active. So when someone asks you how you are doing, we usually by saying how busy we are, because that is what is valued. So ask me, "How you doing, Bishop David?", and I tend to answer with a list of all the things I am doing! Being an active disciple is great. But action without first tuning into what is the will of God will get you in trouble. So this is one traditional reading of this gospel story.

The second one has to do with how focused our lives are. The gospel today has Martha running about doing *many* things, while Mary is doing *one* thing. Jesus says "Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things". "Mary has chosen the better part." He says "*Only one thing is necessary*". Jesus may be teaching us here something about the spiritual life: the importance of having our heart and our mind focused on *what is important, on what is of priority*. When we focus on the one thing that is necessary then all the other activities will fall into place. So the problem isn't that Martha is busy and Mary isn't. It's that Martha has too many things crowding into her life. Mary seems to be anchored in the one thing that is really important.

Now think of when you wake up in the morning and you're facing your day, thinking through all the many different tasks before you. This is what happens to me: I can get really stressed and feel like I do not really want to get out of bed, because I am not sure how I am going to get through all the tasks. But if you focus on the one thing that is really important, how to fulfil my calling as Christian during the day, that is , how to love God and love my

neighbour, then all the tasks, to-do lists, and multiple activities take their place within that one focus, which is after all the most important thing, the *one thing necessary* that this gospel speaks about.

So friends, these are two standard interpretations of this gospel story. And these interpretations do offer some spiritual wisdom for us. But here's the third one. It comes from the teaching of Bishop Tom Wright. He is a New Testament scholar who was the Bishop of Durham and who now teaches at St Andrews University in Scotland. I don't always agree with Tom Wright, but I think he might be onto something with this particular understanding of this little gospel passage.

He reminds us that one of the principal marks of Jesus' teaching and ministry is the overturning of social conventions and norms. So Jesus made a habit of eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners – shocking to the people of his time. He associated with Samaritans a group of people with whom the Jews had nothing to do. He spoke kindly to the Roman soldiers who were absolutely hated by the Jews. He touched those that were unclean, the lepers. In all these ways he turned upside down the social norms of his day. Why did he do this? He did this to show us what the kingdom of God is like. He does this to show how broken and corrupt our world is, compared to the way God wishes to run things, and so he had to turn things around.

Now one of the most radical ways that Jesus challenged the social norms of his day was his attitude towards women. He allowed women into his inner circle of disciples – unheard of for a rabbi of his time. He spoke publicly to the woman at the well which would be considered outrageous, for men did not speak publicly to women who are not their close family members. He forgave the woman caught in adultery. And of course let us not forget that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. Tom Wright says this story of Martha and Mary is another example of this radical way of Jesus. We may miss this insight because we are so out of touch with the social conventions of Jesus time.

But listen: Here is Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha (and we assume Lazarus, their brother). Martha is in the space traditionally reserved for women; she's in the kitchen running about getting the meal ready. That's what women were expected to do and the kitchen was the space that women were expected to occupy in a house. In the culture of Jesus and also in the culture of many parts of the world today, houses were divided into space for men and space for women. While this woman's work was going on in the background the men would usually sit in the public areas of the house together and talk. And certainly if a prominent teacher was present in the house than men would sit at his feet and listen to his words. Sitting at the feet of the teacher was the attitude of the disciple the one who wanted to learn from the master. But friends in Jesus' day this was a man's role; *this is what men would do*.

So now we might be able to understand why Mary angered Martha. Martha wasn't simply angry because Mary was giving her more work to do. She was angry because Mary had the gall to assume the place of a man, to take up a position in what was traditionally the man's space. *Mary is behaving as if she were a man*. She had violated a very important boundary within the house, indeed a boundary within the whole social world.

So when Jesus says Martha, Mary has chosen the better part, he is actually making a radical statement about women taking their full place in the life of the Church as disciples. That is why St Paul in one of his letters is able to teach that in Christ there was no slave nor free, no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female. This is really radical stuff, dear friends. The ancient world at the time of Jesus could only think of itself operating with these divisions in place; the categories of human beings was important, each had different value. So freemen were

worth much more than slaves. Jews were considered to be morally and superior to the pagan Greeks. And males were seen to be superior to females.

But in Jesus ministry and teaching, the kingdom of God cuts through all these social norms; the kingdom of God reverses all this. There are no longer such distinctions. Everybody, is summoned to in the circle of Jesus's disciples – there are no categories and difference. All are included, all are welcome.

Candidates for baptism and confirmation today, everybody is called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is calling for everybody; everybody is invited into this intimate relationship with Christ. We are truly blessed by your witness that you are answering this call today, men and women together. But remember also some of the ancient teaching from this gospel, that your life of active discipleship must be grounded in times of quiet listening; we call that prayer. Remember that in the many things you are engaged in, it is *the following of the way of Jesus*, loving God and loving your neighbour, that takes priority over all your to-do lists and multiple tasks.

But most importantly, remember, no matter who you are, no matter your background, your education, your gender, your nationality, no matter what society says, no matter what the cultural norms may be, this is the most important decision you will make to be a disciple of Jesus. There is nothing, no boundary, no convention, no rule that can ever keep you away from being close to Jesus, from being his friend, his follower.

This is the better part that Jesus, says to Mary. That I think is one of the most important teachings of this story.