

Trinity 5 2019

John's Gospel tells us that "Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus" (11.15). In this Sunday's Gospel, Luke recounts Jesus's first visit to their home. On this occasion, Martha allows her anxiety about the practical arrangements of his visit to overwhelm her. When she expresses resentment at her sister for sitting and listening to Jesus, he corrects her. Martha has allowed herself to become "worried and distracted", when, in fact, "there is need of only one thing": precisely the attentive listening that Mary of Bethany is engaged in.

Jesus is neither denigrating practical action nor setting up contemplation as a rival and superior activity. Rather, he is calling Martha to integrate them in her life, to recognise that there is a time to listen attentively and a time to act. Indeed, it is only when action flows from an encounter with her Lord from sitting at his feet, and receiving his word that it will be faithful and fruitful. Perhaps because of Mary's attentiveness, she is one of the few disciples who truly understands Jesus's teaching, anointing him for burial on the eve of his Passion, as St John's Gospel reminds us;

*1-Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them<sup>[a]</sup> with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii<sup>[b]</sup> and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it<sup>[c]</sup> so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Mary also shows us the difference between attentive listening and mere passivity. As David Lyle Jeffrey explains, her behaviour in our Gospel reading is "most unusual"; for "women were not in Judaism permitted to sit at the feet of a rabbi, since discipleship in their context was reserved for men alone" (*Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke*). To listen at Jesus's feet was itself an act of boundary-crossing. We see this same courageous spirit at work when she anoints him in Holy Week.

Kenneth Leech warns that excessive busyness is the enemy of the spiritual life and a constant danger for those called to the most active ministries. They are the ones who need most urgently to cultivate a contemplative heart. Leech cautions against

*“frenzy and compulsive busyness”, which leads to “lack of focus, a tendency to accumulate more and more things, a collapse of reflection, and the cultivation of a personal culture of obligatory tiredness. This personal culture then becomes socially infectious so that one may communicate little to others other than one’s own exhaustion” (Through Our Long Exile).*

Today’s Gospel offers an example of the “infectious” nature of such busyness. We see how anxiety and distraction can lead to resentment of those who refuse to get drawn into it and, like Mary of Bethany, choose “the better part”.

Stillness and silence should be a component of every Christian life. Some vocations involve more of that than others, but Mary’s “better part” is “needful” for us all. We should draw encouragement from the fact that even the saints most famous for their contemplative practice did not find this easy. St Teresa of Ávila used to shake the hourglass that marked out her time of silent prayer to make it pass more quickly. The distracted state of our minds and hearts makes stillness challenging, and the fruitfulness of our times of prayer is not dependent on whether they feel fulfilling or enjoyable.

Mary and Martha, attentiveness to earthly encounters provides an opening to the things of heaven. Precisely because the earth is God’s creation, the two worlds, if we have eyes to see, are intertwined.

To allow earthly things to be a gateway to the things of God rather than a distraction from them is a central spiritual task. It focuses our hearts on the things that will endure for eternity. As St Augustine explains, when “all our busy activities” are over and done with, “the only thing that will remain will be alleluia. That is the delightful part that Mary chose for herself.”

How much time do we spend in prayer and contemplation? Is our contemplation an excuse for justifying a bit of shut eye, so to speak? I find great comfort from the knowledge that St Teresa of Avila shook the hourglass to make the time pass more quickly.

Deeply engrained into Christian theology, meditation and reflection is what is known as the Jesus prayer. I use it myself as a sort of personal mantra. It goes like this;

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

I commend it to you for daily use and in times of trial.

Amen