

Martha and Mary

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 21st July 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Genesis 18: 1 –10a; Luke 10: 38 –end

Over the years I've lost count of the number of people who have confessed to me that the reading we've just heard is their least favourite passage in the Gospels. Many of us are busy people whose lives are full of stuff to do, much of which won't wait, and we naturally identify with Martha in this story. Generous, hospitable, activist Martha, who rolls up her sleeves and gets things done. And we quietly admire her, rather than that smug and complacent Mary sitting at Jesus's feet, doing nothing except fluttering her eyelashes and conning him into giving her all the approval. That's what it feels like, doesn't it, as though Jesus is treating Martha unfairly and by implication, all of us who might identify with Martha in her desire to keep the household functioning and get the necessary jobs done. Does Jesus not realise that if you don't work you don't eat? There may be something in this passage about the dangers of busyness distracting us from paying attention to Jesus himself: Jesus does seem to show compassion for Martha, and acknowledges that she's worried and distracted by many things, but I wonder whether there might be more to this passage than that.

The thing that always puzzled me about this story of Martha and Mary, is where Luke has placed it in his gospel. It comes right at the end of chapter 10 which begins with Jesus sending out 70 disciples to go on ahead of him, receiving hospitality from all kinds of communities, and announcing the nearness of God's kingdom - that sounds like a fairly activist agenda. And it's followed immediately by the story of the Good Samaritan, and the importance of seeing all people as our neighbour. And then, the story of Martha and Mary, is followed by Jesus teaching his disciples about prayer and giving them the Lord's Prayer. So the Martha and Mary passage seems to be a kind of bridge taking us from the Good Samaritan and the mission of the 70 to the Lord's Prayer. How does that work?

Last week I was suggesting that the point of the story of the Good Samaritan is not to teach us the obvious truth that we should be kind and helpful to people in need, rather, the story is told to a lawyer who wants to know how to inherit eternal life. And Jesus is making the point that if he wants to be open to eternity you cannot hedge your life around with boundaries and conditions: if you want to deal with the eternal God, you have to be open to all those who bear God's image, without limit and without condition.

And so in a world where the human instinct is to try and limit our responsibilities, and narrow down the number of those towards whom we feel an obligation, the Gospel breaks down the barricades of self-protection and self-righteousness, and insists that the grace of God is poured out without distinction upon the deserving and the undeserving, the believer and the unbeliever, the family member and the foreigner, alike. And there's something of that going on in the story of Martha and Mary.

Mary's activity in this story is far more controversial than at first you might think: in the first place she has strayed out from the private quarters of the house at the back, into the public room where guests were received but where women would not normally venture and certainly not be expected to talk to male guests. So Mary is crossing a social barrier in that way. And the description of her sitting at Jesus's feet doesn't mean she was gazing up at him adoringly like a dog, she was doing what St. Paul was doing when he sat at the feet of his rabbinic teacher Gamaliel. And so when Mary sits at Jesus's feet, she is quietly and subversively adopting the attitude of a pupil under instruction, to become a rabbi or teacher like Jesus himself. It seems Mary also wishes to announce that God's kingdom is near, just like the 70 disciples who are going out at the beginning of the chapter. And so her crime in Martha's eyes is not that she's failing to help peel the spuds, it's that she's behaving like a man, "Fancy, Mary, imagining that you could be a teacher like Jesus." But Jesus affirms her right to embrace a bigger calling than the one her culture would normally allow. Mary is showing signs of wanting to be an apostle and Jesus seems perfectly happy to encourage her.

So do you see the parallel with the Good Samaritan? The Good Samaritan crosses social and religious and national boundaries, in order to demonstrate what it means to be a true neighbour; Jesus enables Mary to cross social and cultural boundaries, and to

set aside the taboos and conventions of her day in order to be free to embrace a bigger calling than social custom then permitted. These stories are about how the Gospel breaks down the fences we love to put up to confine one another and keep each other in our place. These stories are about how the Gospel sets us free and invites us to enter a bigger reality and a more life-giving way of looking at other people and ourselves. It's a bit scary, because it invites us into the unknown and into new ways of 'being', but it's exciting, because it's Jesus who is inviting us and Jesus who is waiting for us.

So this morning, I wonder whether you might reflect on whether you've ever been guilty, a little like Martha, of trying to 'pigeonhole' others? Of failing to recognize someone else's potential: "She could never do that! Who does she think she is?" Or even of failing to accept someone as an equal: "We don't want their kind here, they don't belong."

And you might also reflect on whether 'you' might be called to be a bit more like Mary? Might Jesus be inviting you to outgrow your previous role? Or to believe that you can be more than you currently think you are? Maybe you've been put in a box by others and you've been in danger of accepting the labels and limitations other people have placed upon you.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus is likely to take you on a journey, because in the sense that I'm suggesting, it expresses a desire to become more like him, and maybe that means to grow in fearlessness, and to grow in love. Because that's what Christian discipleship ultimately means: it's about growing more into the likeness of Jesus himself, and that means finding ways to sit at his feet, not simply in terms of spending hours in prayer (although maybe that's why the next passage is about the Lord's Prayer), but more actively learning from him, copying his actions, listening to his words, embracing his way of looking at things and at other people.

Mary may be a slightly unlikely revolutionary but she offers us insight into how being a disciple requires us to grow in sometimes radical and unexpected ways. May you be open to such growth and like Mary, may you hear the Lord commend you for choosing the better part.

Reading Texts

Genesis 18:1-10a

1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Luke 10:38-end

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."