

Revd Dr Lisa Cornwell

Sunday 21st July 2019

The Parish Church of St John the Baptist

8am: Holy Communion

10am: Sung Eucharist

5th after Trinity/ Proper 11

Year C

Theme: The active versus the contemplative life

Readings: Genesis 18:1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

Sources: N T Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays* Year C
Kitchen, et. al, *WORD of Life* Year C
Teasdale, et. al, *The Mindful Way Workbook*

Are you a Mary or a Martha?

Is one way of being better than the other?

It is easy for us to sympathise with Martha. For Martha, love for Jesus meant preparing him a meal. There was a lot to be done. She was in a bit of a flap.

Modern society adheres to the tradition of Martha. We are distracted by so many tasks. Our culture is characterised by an accelerating pace of change where we are all running to keep up. Not only are we left trying to keep abreast of new technologies, but consumerism pressurises people to transform every aspect of their lives. It is a “make over” culture, with a relentless emphasis on self-reinvention. There is both social acceleration and accelerated change of the self. As Anthony Elliott puts it, the self “turns into performance, presentation and public relations.”¹ It is an exhausting time to be alive. We can’t even sleep because we are so wired. But as the mental health crisis worsens as a result, there is a gathering resistance to the status quo. Mindfulness is making its mark. It promotes being rather than doing, living in the present rather than the future and, literally, taking time to wake up and smell the coffee. Mindfulness is a Mary mindset.

¹ Elliott, *Self*, 172-175.

[We can relate mindfulness to Christian practices. Historically, it has often been assumed that the active and contemplative life are in opposition but the likes of St Benedict and Thomas Merton saw no such conflict.² We need both. Contemplative prayer, the prayer of simply being in God's presence, also known as the *prayer of the heart*, is not just for those who have entered the religious life. The prayer itself influences the rest of life. Merton writes, "we are not speaking here of the prayer of the heart as an isolated, particular exercise, as a separate department of the devout life. The prayer of the heart must penetrate every aspect and every activity of Christian existence."³ We need times of being to sustain our doing.]

We need first to listen, like Mary, to Christ's teaching and then to act. In Mary we see a deep longing, a deep desire for God. People sat at a teacher's feet in those days, not to remain passive but in order to become teachers themselves. Mary had crossed a boundary, entering the man's world of discipleship rather than simply staying in the kitchen; Jesus affirmed her right to be there. Likewise, Paul's energy came from worshipping at the feet of Jesus. Tom Wright explains: "Colossians, steeped in the adoration of Jesus the image, the first-born, the head, the reconciler, the fullness of God, is also a practical, down-to-earth letter, energetically getting on with the job."

² Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.74

³ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.136-137

There is an interesting balance between the Gospel reading and the story of Abraham and his visitors in our Old Testament reading. Whilst Martha is gently rebuked by Jesus for thinking that hospitality is more important than listening to his teaching, on the other hand, it was through being hospitable that Abraham got to hear God's word for him and Sarah. Ordinary things like cooking or working can either distract us and deafen us to God or become a means for us to practice the presence of God. What makes the difference?

It depends upon where our attention lies. Abraham was the friend of God, the priority of his relationship with God was absolute. Martha's horizons had shrunk. For her the ordinary blocked the Spirit but not for Abraham. As we are reminded in the majestic passage from Colossians, all things hold together in Christ. Our horizons are expanded.

The challenge for us today is to redress the balance between being and doing. We have become so frenzied, like Martha, trying to get everything done that we think is expected of us. We need to stop, take stock, get our equilibrium back and restore our focus. Merton writes, "In the 'prayer of the heart' we seek first of all the deepest ground of our identity in God... We seek... to gain a direct existential grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith,

finding ourselves in God's truth."⁴ More simply, "we seek God himself present in the depths of our being".⁵ For Merton, the aim is to become more conscious of our relationship with our Creator, "to come to know him through the realization that our very being is penetrated with his knowledge and love for us."⁶

It is important to protect time to be with God, to anchor ourselves in His presence. This may mean being tucked away in solitude and quiet or we can be attuned to God in the wider world. Summer is here and it is holiday season. Whether you are heading off to the hills, the coast, or having a staycation, it is an opportunity to pause, to breathe, to notice your environment, to commune with your Creator. The following reflection by Mary Oliver gives us a lead:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand...
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

⁴ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.82

⁵ Merton, *Prayer*, 34

⁶ Merton, *Prayer*, 103-104.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Hear the words of Jesus:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;
there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part”.

Replace Martha with your own name; hear Jesus saying those words
to you. Find time to sit at the feet of the Teacher with no agenda, to
simply be. Amen.