

Sunday 17th July

Genesis 18:1-10a

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-end

So are you a Mary or a Martha?

Are you the type of person who loves to meditate on God, who likes to spend time reading, praying and listening to what God is saying to you? Do you get your energy from such contemplation? Are you someone who recognises that your value comes from who you are in the sight of God rather than anything you do?

Or are you someone who always wants to be doing things. Who wants to be involved and active. Busy, often behind the scenes, making sure things happen and run efficiently. Who finds the idea of being still quite hard? Who thinks that your value comes from God seeing what you do and the effort you put in?

I guess in many ways all of us are a combination of the two, but the wonderful truth is that since we are all different, since we are all unique individuals that point of balance is different for all of us.

I belong to a group which meets every three or four weeks to talk, think and pray about how we follow Jesus – about our discipleship if you like. We ask questions about who we are and how we relate to God. How we recognise his call on our lives. And in doing so we think about how we can move on in our following Jesus. How we can deepen our faith.

And in the past I have been frustrated when (as I see it in my simple mind) I have not been able to be as spiritual as others in the group. They seem to be able to spend much time in prayer and reflection on scripture, whereas I would often after a short time of prayer want to be up and doing things. It was only when I realised this obvious fact that we are all made to be different that I realised that I am much more of an active doing person than a contemplative person. And this freed me from such frustration and even guilt.

But, then I read this story of Martha and Mary and I feel the temptation to be back at square one again. Surely Jesus is saying that he wants us to be Marys, not Marthas. To be those who contemplate on the words of Jesus, those who

pray and listen rather than those who do, rather than being active. And that for many of us is very hard.

But is that what the story is actually about?

We said a few weeks ago that these chapters in Luke's gospel tell the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and that Luke uses the story of that journey to teach us about our discipleship, our own Christian journeys of faith.

We know from elsewhere (in John's gospel) that Mary and Martha lived in Bethany – just a couple of miles from Jerusalem. But, as Luke tells his story of Jesus travelling towards Jerusalem, this story is nowhere near the end of the journey. That comes in chapter 19. So Luke has clearly placed this story here for a reason, not because this is where it fits in terms of timings.

So what is that reason? Why is this story here? If we begin to explore that we may get a better picture of what the story is teaching us – which may not be that Marys are better than Marthas.

Immediately preceding this reading is the one we had last Sunday – the very familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. And that story is about doing. Its about practically showing the love of God. Its about seeing needs and addressing them. Its about healing and hospitality.

And then comes this story.

Luke often pairs stories together. Having a story focussing on a man, followed by one concentrating on a woman. He does this to show that Jesus welcomes both men and women equally – perhaps not a radical thought for us but it certainly would have been 2000 years ago.

So at the start of the gospel we have in the incident temple when Jesus was a baby and mentions of both Simeon and Anna.

We have the story of the synagogue leader's daughter followed by the story of the widow who lived in Nain and her son who had died

We have the story of Jairus whose daughter was ill interspersed with that of the woman with haemorrhages.

And in the “lost” parables we have a lost sheep with a male shepherd and a lost coin with a female householder.

And here we have the Good Samaritan story followed by this one. So one thing worth noticing today is that the story is about women. And, in Mary’s case, a woman doing something women would not normally do – sitting at the feet of Jesus. To sit at the feet of a rabbi – a teacher – was to place oneself as a disciple of that rabbi. The apostle Paul himself tells us (in Acts) that he sat at the feet of Gamaliel – a rabbi, meaning that he was a student, a pupil or a disciple of Gamaliel.

In those days it was a male role to be a disciple. Women would not be expected to do this. One reason for including this story was for Luke to point out that in Jesus something new was happening. Both men and women could be disciples, could be followers of Jesus. And Mary in this story was making that point.

So far so good, but why then did Luke place this story here. Straight after the story of the Good Samaritan? Is there a connection between the theme of showing love in a practical way as shown in the Good Samaritan with this story?

Well yes, I think there is.

The story begins as a story about hospitality – practical action. “he entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home”. And perhaps we would do well to read it as a story about how we might perform such practical action; how we might welcome and embrace and practise hospitality.

Martha seemed to have got it sorted. She recognised Jesus for who he was (notice that she calls him Lord). She realised that love and service was the right way of expressing her love and worship. So she busied herself. We can imagine her in the kitchen, preparing a meal for Jesus. Making sure all was just right for this special visitor. And doing so out of love.

It was only when she noticed her sister that the mood changes.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself. Tell her to help me.”

If she had not noticed Mary, perhaps she would have been quite content.

Jesus never says to Martha that what she was doing was wrong. He never tells her that sitting at his feet, listening to him would be “better”(whatever that means) than serving him. What he does say is that she was distracted by many things. Distracted from serving him; distracted from her primary goal of loving him and serving him. She was more concerned about what her sister was not doing than what she was doing and why she was doing it.

“There is need of only one thing” says Jesus.

I think that he means that the one thing for both of them was to focus on Jesus. Mary by listening; Martha by serving. Both are right. We could perhaps say that Martha in her hospitality was to welcome the humanity of Jesus; Mary in her listening was to worship the deity of Jesus. Both were to focus on him.

So the message of the story for us – far from setting Mary up above Martha – is to say that both practical action and quietly listening are both important. But whichever route we take we are to focus on Jesus.

We are to do things because of him. We are to pray and listen and reflect because of him. And a healthy Christian life involves both action and stillness, but because we are all different that balance between the two will be different for us all. Perhaps we would do well to ponder on those words of Jesus “There is need of only one thing” - and think of what that one thing might be for us.

We could summarise this in words from Colossians 3:17

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.