

Luke 10.38-42: JUST ONE THING IS NEEDFUL

[Chelmsford 5 Jan 2014]

MARY AND MARTHA

Over the years I have become something of a regular at the Sheldon centre, a retreat centre for ministers, on the eastern edge of the Dartmoor National Park. It's a beautiful place. I have never known a more comfortable retreat centre – nor have I known a more delightful setting.

This centre is run by an outfit called 'The Society of Mary and Martha' – indeed as a result of my visits I have become one of its patrons. Why you might ask such a name? It's quite a mouthful – and to some it also sounds a little High Church too.

1. Initially I thought the name was chosen because of the story of Mary and Martha we find in Luke's Gospel: Martha who was overwhelmed by all the work she had to do for Jesus – and Mary who opted out of the work and instead made time to sit and listen to Jesus. For a centre dealing with over 500 stressed out ministers every year, the title of 'The Society of Mary and Martha' makes sense. The fact is that far too many ministers suffer from the Martha syndrome.
2. However, I discovered that this was not the chief reason for the name. Rather, the name was chosen because of its associations with hospitality. For if we look at the Gospels as a whole, we discover that Mary and Martha are noted for opening up their home to Jesus. Indeed, the implication of John 11.5 is that Jesus was a frequent guest in the home of Mary and Martha – so much so that John tells us that "**Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus**". We discover that in the final week of his life, it was to the home of Mary and Martha that Jesus went (John 12.1). I believe it is no exaggeration to say that to cope with the stress of ministry, Jesus went to their home in Bethany. For Jesus was no super-man - he was a man of flesh and blood - a man who knew what it was to be tired and exhausted. Their home in Bethany was a haven of calm in the storms of life.

Just as Mary and Martha welcomed Jesus to their home, so the Society of Mary and Martha welcomes ministers to their centre in Sheldon.

In the words of their welcome card: "*Here may you lay aside burdens borne for self and others. May this place be for you a vessel of love, where from you may draw rest, silence, healing and vision. And may the Creator's love warmly glow from all that you see*".

Certainly that has always been my experience when I have visited Sheldon. As a result of the hospitality I have experienced there, I have always returned with a new spiritual dynamic, ready to face all the challenges of ministry back here in Chelmsford.

Mary and Martha were examples of hospitality.

Actually, I keep on saying 'Mary and Martha' –perhaps because the Society of which I am patron is called 'The Society of Mary and Martha'.

But in reality it was the home of Martha and Mary – with the emphasis of Martha.

MARTHA AND MARY

Martha was clearly the leading figure in the home.

In Luke 10.38, for instance, we read that “**a woman named Martha welcomed Jesus [lit.him] in her home**”. Yes, Mary lived there – and so too their brother Lazarus – but nonetheless it was first and foremost Martha’s home.

Perhaps she was the eldest sibling - or maybe she was simply the dominant figure.

I find it fascinating that John when he mentions Jesus’ love for Martha and Mary, actually does not mention Mary by name: “**Jesus loved Martha and her sister**” (John 11.5).

Whatever, Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, and immediately began to rush round getting things ready for a meal. After all, Jesus was an important guest – if not a special friend.

Not any old dinner would do. Something special was called for.

Just imagine if you had your boss over for dinner – you wouldn’t give the boss beans on toast.

Gracious, you would want to give the boss at least a three-course meal.

I can imagine Martha rushing around – first of all getting a decent starter: a Palestinian equivalent of prawn cocktail perhaps. Then there would be the main course – perhaps some lamb chops, who knows. Then, a dessert – figs and cream might have been appropriate in that culture.

So there she was – busy for Jesus.

Alas, she was so busy to please Jesus, that she had no time to be with Jesus.

There she was, rushing around in the kitchen, whereas her sister was sitting with Jesus in the front room. In the words of the NRSV: “**Martha was distracted by her many tasks**” (v40).

Or in the words of the GNB “**Mary was upset over all the work she had to do**” (v40).

It just wasn’t right. There she was, slaving over the hot oven, rushing upstairs to make a bed for Jesus, spraying polish here there and everywhere, while Mary was enjoying herself with Jesus. It doesn’t take much imagination to visualise the scene.

We can imagine her mounting indignation: what was Mary think about, leaving all the work to her? Surely Jesus could see the injustice? At lengthy, unable to contain herself she burst out of the kitchen and blew her top. “**Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!**” (v40).

To her undoubted amazement Jesus rebuked her. “**Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her**” (vv41-42).

If you have a Bible with foot-notes, we may see that there is an alternative translation: for some MSS contain the words “**You are worried and troubled over so many things. But few things are necessary**” – as if Jesus is saying. “*Martha you are preparing too many dishes – only a few, indeed, perhaps just one dish, is necessary!*”

Whatever, the point is clear. Martha had her priorities wrong.

LET’S GET OUR PRIORITIES RIGHT

What do we learn from this story?

In particular, what do we learn from this story as we begin a New Year?

What do we learn from this story as we start a week of prayer?

1. *We need to beware of being over-busy for Jesus*

Martha was so keen to do things for Jesus, that she never had sufficient time to be with Jesus. Martha stands as a warning to over-busy Christians.

For just as Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, so there are Christians who have welcomed Jesus into their lives. They have made him their Lord and Saviour. Yet, if the truth be told, they never have time to be with him. They are so busy doing things for him, that they never have time to be with him.

There are so many things to do for Jesus – both in the church and outside the church. Now, don't get me wrong. It is not that Jesus doesn't want us to do things for him. I find it highly significant that the passage immediately preceding the story of Martha and Mary is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable ends with Jesus saying, "**You then, go and do the same**". There is a place for doing – there is a place for actively serving Jesus. Indeed, it may well be that for some of us, Jesus would say that we are insufficiently busy for him.

But there are others of us who are over-busy.

Our busyness for Jesus needs to be balanced with times when we are just 'being with Jesus'. Otherwise we will run dry, and have nothing to offer others.

One Anglican bishop (Taylor-Smith) used to speak of the '*barrenness of a busy life*'.

The American Jesuit Thomas Merton was no doubt referring to that phenomenon when he said: "*Action is the stream and contemplation is the spring. If the spring dries up, then what?*"

2. *We need to take time out to be still*

Yes, if we would re-charge our batteries, then we must learn to wait upon God in the silence.

- Drawing upon the imagery of Is 40.30-31 John Southall, a Quaker, wrote: "*We cannot go through life strong and fresh on constant express trains; but we must have quiet hours, secret places of the Most High, times of waiting upon the Lord when we renew our strength and learn to mount up on wings as eagles, and then come back to run and not be weary, and to walk and not faint*"
- Or in the imagery of John 15, we need to take time to "abide" in Jesus, the vine. We need take time to develop our relationship with Jesus and draw from him that life-giving energy we need if we are to serve him. To quote Thomas Merton again: "*Abiding is a consciousness of our union with God, of our complete dependence on Him, for all our vital acts in the spiritual life, and of His constant, loving presence in the depth of our souls*"

Mary “**sat down at the feet of the Lord**” (10.39). We need to do the same – we need to consciously spend time in the presence of our Lord. Only so can we be effective for God.

In this regard listen to The Twenty-Third Psalm for Busy People, with which World Vision prefaced their manual on Time Management:-

*The Lord is my pace-setter, I shall not rush,
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals,
He provides me with images of stillness, which restore my serenity.
He leads me in the ways of effectiveness through calmness of mind, and his guidance is peace.
Even though I have a great many things to accomplish today. I will not fret for his presence is here, his timelessness, His all-importance will keep me in balance.
He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with his oils of tranquillity, my cup of joyous energy overflows
Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours, for I shall walk at the pace of my Lord, and dwell in his house for ever”*

3. **We need to take time out to listen**

And as we spend time with Jesus, then - like Mary - we need to “**listen**” to the Lord, and in this way reset our spiritual compass.

What is it that God is calling us to do in 2014?

Are our priorities this year his priorities?

There is nothing worse than going all out for Christ, giving our time to this activity or that, and then discovering that it was all for nothing.

If we are to discover what God would really have us do, then we need to listen – and listening takes time – for listening involves reading God’s Word and then prayerfully reflecting on his Word. Do you do that? It is all too easy to read the Scripture for the day, but not listen? What is needed is what has been called ‘lectio divina’ – chewing the cud (or rather the Scripture), asking ourselves, ‘What is God saying to me?’.

Martha, said Jesus, you have got your priorities wrong: “**You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed**”. As individuals and as a church here is lesson for us all. A lesson to live balanced lives – lives in which service for Jesus is balanced by time with Jesus.