

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year C 2019

The gap of 2000 years, the gap of language and belief and culture, makes it difficult for us to imagine the importance attached to hospitality in the culture in which Jesus lived. Being invited to eat in someone's home was of *great* significance. It was not only a sign of honour, it was also was a statement about closeness, that amounted to saying, "you're one of the family." Inviting someone into your home today is still (hopefully) meaningful, but back then it had the greatest significance attached to it. As we hear in the First Reading today from Genesis, it is when Abram, *extends hospitality* to the three mysterious strangers, that God and his plan for Abraham is revealed.

In the gospel placed before us today, we hear of Martha engaged the important work of hospitality. Now, when Jesus makes comment about Martha's efforts, we need to see that he certainly wasn't *criticizing* Martha or her work. And we need to recognise that there is not just one way to serve Jesus; there's not just one way of being a Christian, not one way of serving Christ, not one way of making his love and truth known: it is expressed in *many* ways. And so in the gospel today, we see Luke presenting Martha and Mary as two sisters who *both* want to please the Lord. And in fact, both *do* please Him. Martha takes the way of service - the path of working *for* the Lord. Mary takes the path of relationship - being *with* the Lord. One path involves *doing*; the other path involves *being*.

Now, churches can be very busy places. Too busy sometimes. Of course, there is much to be done to ensure we keep the show on the road. There are needs to be addressed; urgent matters that need attending; bills that need to be paid; meetings that have to be endured. But we can get caught up in that busyness, as if doing stuff - even good and necessary and important stuff - is really what it's all about. But as Our Lord reminds us today, *the one necessary thing* is union with God. So often in Christian life, being *with* the Lord becomes something of an afterthought. But the heart of Christian faith is an *encounter* with the Lord Jesus. And so, all our activities, our ministries, our meetings, our fundraising efforts must be seen through the lens: *will this help us in some way better meet the Lord?* Everything else is a distraction.

It's no accident, of course, that the gospel writer Luke places what we hear today immediately after what we heard last week: the story of the Good Samaritan. And so, the 'go and do likewise' which ends *that* parable, is put into perspective. Mere activism, creating a utopia in which we are all kind and loving and compassionate *is not* the end point of faith. The 'end point' is being with the Lord! Now, Jesus is not asking us to choose between being a Martha or being a Mary. But it is about a right ordering of our lives; about being clear about our proper focus and priority. For sure, to fully be a disciple of Jesus we need to be both Martha *and* Mary. Indeed, we need to see that in order to be a good Martha, we must first be a good Mary. A flourishing Christian life – and a flourishing church – comes when our activism flows from the wellspring of prayer. Even so much of the very *good* works the church can be engaged in, of tending to the needs of the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable, will be reduced to mere social work if it does not come from prayer and does not fact lead us closer to the encounter with the Lord Christ.

It is from the well spring of prayer - *of the one thing necessary* - that everything else will flow. I know there's lots to do, not only to grow the life of this church but to just to keep it going!! But we have to be careful to not get lost in a whirl of activity that sees us lose focus of why we're really here. While we have many things to do, prayer and worship are the absolute priorities. These are the proper focus and anchor of *all* that we seek to do. If we wish to have anything meaningful to say to the world, and if wish to engage in any meaningful activity in the world, then *we* need to be sure of rightly-ordered priorities.

This parish is indeed looking toward implementing some important new initiatives. And expanding core ministries already in place. But all these need to be upheld by prayer. We need to take this central ministry seriously. Changing the Tuesday and Thursday mass times will help in the communal aspect of that. But our personal commitment to daily prayer is not limited to this of course. And we must all take personal responsibility for how we live out our personal prayer. Our baptismal vocation demands it!

It is one of my reflections on the particular grace of old age. Too often we permit the later stages of life to be the cause of despair, or an excuse to say that you've passed your use by date. But I'm afraid there is no expiry date in Christian life! The grace of baptism doesn't run out at a certain age!! Those no longer able to be busy, to work as they once did, can give themselves over to the life of prayer. Consider this to be your ministry! I need your prayers. And the future life and growth of this church needs your prayers!

But *every* follower of Jesus needs to ask themselves, throughout their lives, what they are doing to maintain their personal relationship with God. Quiet times, times of reflection, times spent "sitting at the feet of the Lord" seeking to listen to him seem to be regarded these days as luxuries. In truth, they are not – *they are absolute necessities*. Not just for the religious 'professionals'. Not just for some 'super-spiritual elite'. But all of us. "*Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen it and it will not be taken away from her.*"

If our lives are not properly ordered in that way, if the priority of all our lives is not in being present to the Lord, then we will be "*worried and concerned about many things*" as our Lord warns Martha. We will be doing all sorts of things, and feeling as if you're accomplishing little, if anything. The remedies to this are really quite simple. But we need to recognise the priority. It is staggering to me that good, faithful, lifelong Christians can exercise almost the entirety of their Christian life without a personal life of prayer. I've recently had people come to me, growing in their personal devotion and commitment to the life of prayer, but expressing their nervousness that others might see their increased religiosity as being extreme. How sad is that!? What a scandal for the church that some might feel unsure how their growth in faith would be regarded... Oh! That *all the church* would burn for love of Christ!

Mary and Martha delight in welcoming the Lord into their home. But the Lord is also present to us; he chooses to make his home with us. In each other, when we gather, in his word, in his sacrament. We too must delight in his presence, and make that our priority! And our most important work must be of helping others discover it as well! Amen.