

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year C 2022

The gospel portion placed before us today provides us with a helpful reminder that sometimes we have to work a little harder to get to the true sense of a reading than what is immediately apparent. The little story of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha would appear pretty simple and straightforward and it can leave us with a sense of Mary = good; Martha = bad. And this kind of thinking has been reinforced by centuries of interpretations along this line.

However, there are some practical problems with this approach. How does *this* whole 'show' keep going if people do not make an active effort to keep it going?! Who is going to turn up to the working bee next Saturday? Who sets up the hall for morning tea and clears it all up? The list is near-endless of things that need to be done to keep this church going, for example. And there are personal problems with this approach as well. Can I really justify my laziness by saying I was 'listening to Jesus'? Do I simply disengage with the practical things that need to be done to support the church because I think I've got more important things to be doing? There is good evidence that suggests that Christians both feel they are expressing their faith most clearly when involved in practical action, and that this helps them learn and grow in faith.

We often suppose that the contrast in the gospel portion today is one between Mary's listening and Martha's work in offering practical hospitality. But in fact, that *is not* the contrast Luke is pointing us to at all. After all, in the preceding parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus has *emphasised* the importance of practical care as the test of love of God and of neighbour. *Go and do likewise!* we are told. So, in the account placed before us today, the issue is not the activity so much as the focus. Luke tells us that Martha is '*distracted*' and Jesus observes that she is '*anxious and troubled*'. And we can begin to see why in her request. Her concern is with 'me' - *Mary has left me...tell her to help me* - rather than her focus being on attending to her guest, Jesus.

The real contrast here is between *distraction* caused by the 'many' rather than focus on the 'one'. In other words, the welcome Jesus seeks *is not* epitomized in distracted, worrisome, domestic performance, but in attending to this guest. This little domestic scene is not meant to leave us with an idea of Mary/good, Martha/bad but a sense of proper order, indeed of priority. Jesus is properly the priority of our lives. And good things, helpful and necessary things, true, beautiful, and noble things can become problematic if they are not properly ordered.

While traditional interpretations have tended toward exalting Mary and somewhat denigrating Martha – and I have suggested it is not as simple as that - the natural temptation in our personal lives and communal lives *does tend* toward activism. This remains a perennial temptation and one, we might say, which is a particular temptation of our day and our context. We should always be more than a little cautious when activism and frenetic busyness becomes the mark of faith. Activism can become, if you like, the default position once the heart of faith, the content of faith, has been hollowed out. Indeed, it can become a substitute for the content of faith.

We see this again and again, in individuals and churches and sometimes entire denominations, who place their ‘raison d’etre’ on so-called ‘social justice’. It is very easy to present the faith and the teaching of Jesus as nothing more than a vehicle to realizing a social utopia. But this means you don’t actually need Jesus at all, because it really is just about changing society, overcoming oppression, and ‘making the world a better place’. In other words, faith in Jesus Christ becomes reduced to our effort, our work. Now, a faith without the saving work of Jesus is of course what the secularists and atheists delight in! *See, they say, you don’t really need all that superstitious mumbo jumbo propping you up after all!* In the social justice gospel, we don’t actually need a saviour. We just need to overcome inequality!

But so often activism can slip into some sort of neo-pagan arrangement: *I’ll do this for you God if you do this for me*. That is of course how all the old religions ‘worked’ - a system of exchange. And the bigger the effort, the more extreme the offering, the more likely to get a favorable outcome from the divine. But for Christianity as a religion of grace, this is not how it works at all! However, the spirits of the old religions linger, and so often we think we have to *prove* ourselves, or show how seriously we take it all, by what we *do*. Burnout is a real phenomenon, even in the life of faith, even in churches, even amongst the clergy. And it highlights the Martha issue, of taking the focus off Jesus and onto ‘me’, the issue of distraction and of losing focus.

I was reminded of something of the remedy to this during this past week in my own reading in an article looking at two of the key figures from our Anglican patrimony: George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar. We sometimes imagine our context as the worst of times, that it has never been as bad for the church as it is now. But 17th-century England was a dangerous and tumultuous time for the church in England. Herbert and

Farrer show us how to be attentive to *the things that matter* even in chaotic times. (Maybe Fr James will expand on their lives in one or two of his epistles...)

But simply, Herbert, after studies at Trinity College, Cambridge, served in parliament under James I. After the king's death he was ordained a priest and served in country parishes. During that time, he gained a reputation for leading a godly, domestic religious community with his wife and servants. He ministered faithfully to the poor in his parish and wrote poetry. He died at the age of thirty-nine having written what is arguably the finest devotional poetry in the English language. Meanwhile, his friend and contemporary Nicholas Farrer was appointed to the tiny parish of Little Gidding, where he established an informal religious community with his wife, children, and his brother's family. It led him to be accused by the Puritans of being a papist. But while a fugitive, King Charles I made a clandestine visit to Little Gidding. It was a little oasis.

While their own church and country was torn apart by decades of religious strife, immorality, violence, greed and corruption, Herbert and Farrer simply got on with living an authentic Christian life. Monarchs were overthrown, and enemies imprisoned, tortured, beheaded, and worse. But in the face of the terror and uncertainty, Ferrar and Herbert simply did what they could with what they had where they were. They didn't seek worldly power and influence, but focused instead on their families, their prayer life while anchored in their local contexts.

The author at the end of the article outlining the lives of Ferrar and Herbert made an important point. I quote: *'When faced with corruption in the church, immorality in the culture, heresy, apostasy, and atheism in the culture, one can go down the path of blame and complain, or one can choose the path of activism and engagement in the culture wars, or one can follow the third way, the way exemplified by Ferrar and Herbert and many other saints down the ages: One can simply get down on one's knees, then roll up one's sleeves and do what one can with what one has where one is. At the time, this course may seem unproductive—a failure even. However, God plays a long game, and those who are faithful are never a failure. The seeds of truth, beauty, and goodness eventually bear a rich harvest.'*

So, the chairs and tables do still need putting away, and the practical help of neighbour needs to be done. Good things need to be properly ordered so that they do not displace Jesus! They all need to focus on the One in whose name we do them. Amen.