

Homily, St Bartholomew's, 6th Sunday after Pentecost

I. My Scottish mother, who hailed from Edinburgh, was a woman of very simple faith. She simply believed the Bible, every word of it, and thought it was all we needed for Christian life.

Well, that is, except for a couple of passages in the Bible of which she strongly disapproved, despite her otherwise very literal belief in the Bible. There were several passages in Ezekiel which fitted into this category of her disapproval, along with the whole of the Book of Revelation. But the one passage in the Gospels she disliked was this story of Martha and Mary.

My mother saw herself as Martha, always working around the house and serving others. She felt that the Lord had been unjust to Martha, putting her down in favour of her lazy sister, Mary. And she's not alone in that view. But is it fair to what St Luke is doing here in telling this story?

II. It would be indeed strange if Luke was condemning Martha for her service and hospitality. This is a Gospel which emphasises the hospitality of God. And we've just heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan where someone is commended for engaging in an act of genuine and heartfelt service.

The same with our reading from the Prophet Amos. In that rather grim passage, Amos speaks out against the merchants and business folk who exploit the poor and needy, instead of caring for them and protecting them, as is their duty. And just as Amos speaks of service to the poor and needy, so elsewhere Luke specifically commends that kind of ministry, especially for those in need. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to serve, especially the poor and vulnerable.

The fact is that, for Luke, Martha's problem is not her engagement in hospitality because that is essentially the work of God in the ministry of Jesus in this Gospel. Nor is she criticised for serving Jesus as her guest. Martha's problem is her anxiety and the fuss she is making, which makes her criticise her sister Mary.

In the ancient world, hospitality was a sacred responsibility. And much of the burden of that fell on women. Guests, and especially honoured guests like Jesus, were to be treated to the very best hospitality that could be offered. And that put a burden not only on women but also those who were poorer.

Martha is resentful that she is missing out. And indeed she is. Our story implies that she is already with Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and only gets up to carry out what she feels are her responsibilities to provide a lavish meal.

III. By contrast, sitting at the feet of Jesus implies that Mary is a disciple who is wanting to learn, to have a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what the kingdom of God means. And Jesus commends Mary because, even though she's neglecting her 'womanly' duties (at least in terms of her own society), she has her priorities absolutely right.

Jesus' defence of Mary invites Martha to reconsider her own priorities. A simple meal is all that is needed. What is much more important is the word of God. Mary is responding to God's hospitality shown in Jesus. Indeed, she's showing her own openness, her own 'hospitality' to God's word as it's embodied in Jesus.

Our reading from Colossians makes it clear who this Jesus is in the beautiful hymn to Christ: he is the eternal Word of God through whom all things came into being, the origin and source of creation; he's the reconciler of all things through his death on the cross; he's the head of the church which is his body on earth. It is at his feet that Mary sits.

V. So what does all of this mean for us today? We're certainly summoned to the service of others. But we're also summoned to move beyond our own anxieties, not to be burdened by them. Our service of others should be life-giving not only for them but also for ourselves. There's nothing selfish about that.

Alongside service, we're also called to sit at Jesus' feet, Jesus who is the Word of God, to listen to his teaching, to be nurtured by his life-giving word. Martha is summoned to leave her anxieties behind and to rejoin her sister Mary at Jesus' feet.

We need, in other words, to get the order right. We need not to be run ragged by our responsibilities and by our ministry and service, and by the cares that lie on our shoulders, as Martha is in our story. We need nurture. We need to be before we do, before we act. And we always need to return to that place at Jesus' feet where we can listen and be comforted and be encouraged by his word.

If we make sitting at the feet of Jesus our priority, as Mary does in our Gospel reading, we receive the word of God into our hearts as a gift not only for ourselves but for others.

The holy Eucharist today is the greatest place to find that nurture, that love, that comfort and reassurance: where we encounter Christ, the Word of God, in his body and blood. We come here to rediscover that we are loved in order that we can go out and love. We allow ourselves to be cared for in order that we can go forth and care for others. We allow ourselves to be nurtured by his word in order that we can bring that life-giving word to others.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy Lee