

Pentecost 8  
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### **Luke 10: 38-42**

“Superficiality is the curse of our age”. That was the first sentence of the book *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. Some of you might remember it. He goes on to write about the traditional religious disciplines which include meditation, prayer, study, simplicity, service, worship etc. The aim of the disciplines is to help us to live life at a deep level with God.

Of course, down the ages, many writers have called people to a deeper way of living. In our Old Testament reading today the prophet Amos speaks out against those people who were anxious for the Sabbath to be over so that they could get on with their trade. Look at how our trading laws have changed in our life times. Remember when shops were closed on Sundays – even Saturday afternoons. Now the big shopping centres are open, at least for a good part of Sunday and little store owners who don't want to open can be forced out of business. All that so many people are interested in is making money and being able to buy things. This is superficial living.

In the same way, Jesus saw Martha's devotion to housework and provision of food as superficial compared with Mary's devotion to listening to the word of God.

Now I must say that I was always on Martha's side. The work has to be done. How often have you heard someone mutter something like “It's all very well for so & so to rave on about the wonderful afternoon – so & so wasn't in the kitchen slaving away!” We feel righteous indignation just as Martha did. But maybe the kitchen staff should go on strike. It is important for everyone to have time to learn about our faith and time to think about it. And that means that it is up to everyone to make sure that the hard slog of work is not always left to the same old devoted few. Now that means able-bodied people. I don't want the frail old feeling guilty if they can no longer do anything to help. They did their bit in years gone by. Naturally some people can no longer share in the work. And remember that just getting showered and dressed is a major effort for some frail or handicapped people. That is their work. They too still need time to be quiet and to think and pray.

It is hard for many of us brought up with a Protestant work ethic to feel comfortable about giving ourselves time to listen to God. We fill our lives with action. I have often been guilty of feeling guilty at relaxing! That old saying “the devil makes work for idle hands” has much to answer for! But I have found, as people have found throughout the ages, that God cannot get through to us when our minds are full of the hurly burly of doing things. God speaks to us when we leave room for him. God’s voice is the still small voice that penetrates our thoughts when we are open to him. Sometimes we need to be very still for that to happen but other times we may be quietly doing a manual task that leaves our minds open to God.

Making sure that we can get the right balance of work and study and contemplation demands discipline. Monastic orders learnt the need for discipline very early. The most famous set of rules for living such a life is the Rule of St Benedict and the American Benedictine nun, Joan Chittester, has written about it. For people living busy lives in modern society she is realistic in saying “. Listen to a tape while travelling to work or doing the housework. And pray on the job”. She says that St Benedict was well aware of the need to work. “There’s a marvellous chapter in the Rule saying, in effect, when you have to get the harvest in, you have to get the harvest in. So pray in the fields! Don’t tell me, he’s saying, that you left the wheat out in the rain because you had to be home at a certain time to pray, to contemplate. This, the wheat, is what must be attended to now. Do it. This is your contemplation.”

When Martha was busy with the food and housework, Jesus clearly saw that she was doing more than was really necessary. Perhaps she was overly houseproud. Certainly she was doing what the women of that society would normally do. In those days only men would normally listen to a rabbi or teacher. But Martha was making the housework the most important thing in her life. Jesus said that everyone should take time to learn and think about the word of God which he was teaching.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is about the importance of listening to Jesus. Indeed the beginning of the reading we heard today was a poem about the centrality and supremacy of Jesus. Bishop Tom Wright says “Christianity isn’t simply about a particular way of being religious. It isn’t about a particular system for how to be saved here or hereafter. It isn’t simply a different way of holiness. Christianity is about Jesus Christ”. The more we study Jesus, the more we know

about God and the nature of God's love. Then our reaction has to be gratitude to God.

Paul goes further to talk about Jesus as Creator. Wright explains this by saying that Jesus is the blueprint for the genuine humanness which is on offer to us through the gospel. Jesus is the place where true God and true humanity meet.

Now we can't just listen to the gospel and assume that all will be well for us. We have to work at it. We need to learn and grow in spiritual maturity throughout our life. Last week's church notices included a list of ABC TV and radio programs on religion. While they vary in subject matter they are usually excellent and as they are broadcast at different times of day and night, at least one series is likely to be of benefit to each of us most weeks. Or we read or attend a home fellowship group. Whichever way we choose, we can find something to help us with our learning about faith. Then we need to allow ourselves to step back and ponder what we have read or heard.

Some people think that it is important to come to faith and then to hold firm to that belief rigidly for the rest of their lives. But that does not allow for growth and learning more about God's way and world. An Australian writer, Michael Casey says that there is a difference between being immobile and being stable. He says that stability is the knack of remaining constant in the midst of change. His example is that of buildings in earthquake zones that are built to sway with the motion. If they were rigid they would crack open.

In a similar way we could think of the way that staking a sapling tree too tightly will not help it to develop a good root system and so it will later be vulnerable in storms. A tree that has not been staked or only staked lightly when a sapling will bend and sway but its roots are firm and deep in the ground because it has grown with movement and so had to develop a good root system.

When we build time into our lives to learn and think about the message Jesus Christ brought, then we too will be able to weather the storms of life. We will be grounded in the love of God and know that God is there for us no matter what.

Amen.