

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 9 – 9am Wesley Uniting – 17th July 2016

Reading: Luke 10:38-42 'The story of Mary and Martha'

Theme: 'Welcoming'

Text: "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him." Vs 38

Introduction

The story of Mary and Martha has been told and re-told over the years to show that one or other of the ways that they operated is wrong. Martha, the workaholic wants Jesus to tell her sister to get up off the floor and do some work around the house so that their guest is appropriately looked after. We tend to sit in either camp, so to speak, those that back Martha and those who support Mary, as Jesus appears to here. Unfortunately this polarises people and categorises them as either workers or reflective types, those who get things done or those who contemplate the spiritual/ethereal.

Too often this has been the tack taken by preachers which simply re-enforces this traditional view. I'm not so sure that this is exactly what Jesus meant. This story has caused trouble from when-ever it was first written down in the mid first century. In the ancient manuscripts that have survived there are five variant readings of what Jesus said to Martha. When this occurs in manuscripts it is a sure sign that those first Christians were having some difficulty with what was being said and we still continue to have some difficulty with this passage. Hence, don't feel that you are alone if you struggle here or want to disagree with my analysis of this passage. I'm going to take the line that there are times when we should be a Martha and there are times when we should be a Mary. Both have attributes that are needed in our Christian pilgrimage and are appropriate and necessary as we travel through our Christian lives. In these few verses both exercise amazing attributes that are part of our Christian living, or at least should be part of our Christian living.

The Passage – Luke 10:38-42

In that part of the world and in Jesus' day, most people would have been horrified by the thought of a man, especially an unmarried man, being invited into the home of and by an unmarried woman.

Right at the outset, Martha by welcoming Jesus into her home has crossed cultural norms that you would not have anticipated or expected. Nor would you have expected Jesus to accept her hospitality as a single Jewish man. Hence from the outset of this short account we are confronted by this reciprocated welcome. Now to put Jesus' visit to Martha in the context of Luke's gospel and the preceding passage, which I heard was well acted out by some of the younger folk last Sunday, there was the parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan was the unexpected carer who helped the mugged stranger. Those religious types didn't want to get their 'hands dirty' by attending to this individual and thus possibly making themselves 'unclean' for their religious duties. It was the 'outsider', the unexpected one, who cares, shows compassion and looks after the needy one. Just possibly Martha has heard that story and so invites the needy stranger into her house, putting to one side the cultural and religious expectations of the day and welcoming Jesus. Hence let's give Martha her credit, she steps out as an early feminist, going against the norms of the day for a single woman and welcomes Jesus wholeheartedly.

Then there is Mary. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. The expression 'sitting at his feet' was a common way of stating that a man was receiving instruction from a Rabbi. However here it is a woman. In fact it is the first recorded case of a woman having such tuition as women were not allowed to be taught. One famous Rabbi said, "Better the Scriptures be burnt than taught to a woman." So what's going on here? Like Martha, Mary comes under the liberating influence of Jesus, She feels free to sit at his feet as a male disciple would. This for us today seems almost implausible that this was a first, but here we have the beginnings of women being free to learn about God and be taught by men with the beginnings of some equality. For this time, this action was revolutionary.

So what we have here in this household is evidence of a radical change. Mary, Martha and Lazarus (who is not mentioned in this account but is in others with his sisters) are part of the new race of humanity that comes into being through the influence of Jesus, freeing people up where culture, tradition and religion have bound them.

Just maybe, one of the reasons that seems like a rebuke to Martha that follows was that Martha had exerted her new-found liberty to invite Jesus to the house, yet then gets annoyed when her sister Mary dares to express her new found liberty by daring to act like a man might. Jesus was not going to allow Mary to be put back into a cultural domestic box.

Look closely at the words that Jesus spoke in this modern translation:

'Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things;
but one thing is necessary; the portion that Mary has chosen is best;
and it shall not be taken from her.' vs 41

Jesus is not only affirming Mary's new found freedom, but is also stating that for a disciple there is one essential pre-requisite: to be still and to listen, to sit and to learn. This is most important and he implies that the other things will flow from this – that is service and servitude. The equipping for ministry requires learning, reflecting, praying and being in the presence of Jesus. This is foundational.

What has this passage to say to us today?

1. I believe first and foremost it is saying to us that we need to make and take time to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn. This requires slowing down, putting the stresses and stressors of life to one side and allowing ourselves to be in the presence of Jesus as a first priority over other things in the world. Our world is a competitive market place and this sense of making time for Jesus without the impingement of other aspects that are going on in our lives is difficult to do. Yet this is what we are called to do.
2. Secondly, we are called to welcome others, even those that we don't necessarily want to welcome or get involved with. This is a tricky one but follows on clearly from the parable of the Good Samaritan from last Sunday. Martha welcomes Jesus in to her home in an amazing way and teaches us that welcoming is part of our faith. For a moment think; 'Where and by whom have you felt most welcomed?' Act on that as you make others feel welcome and don't worry about the social niceties or norms when you welcome others.

3. Thirdly, recognise that in your own life there will be times for 'sitting at the feet of Jesus' and times for action and doing things for others. Don't 'put-down' those who act in ways that are different to you. Accept where you are and where they may be and get on with living out your Christian faith.

Let me finish with a prayer from one of the early Church Fathers, Anselm of Canterbury, who assumes that we can only talk about God as a gift. God has to tell us about God; we are unable to think about God unaided. Therefore all our thoughts about God must be the result of prayer, revelation, gift and grace.

Let us pray:

'Teach us to seek you O God, and reveal yourself to us as we seek; for unless you instruct us we cannot seek You, and unless You reveal yourself we cannot find You. Let us seek You in desiring You; let us desire you in seeking You. Let us find You in loving You; let us love You in finding You. Amen.