

Mary and Martha Trinity 8 2016

Genesis 18 vv 1-10a p17, Psalm 15, Colossians 1 vv 15-28 p1182, Luke 10 vv 38-42 p1042

Whenever we discuss the story of Martha and Mary these days, it seems that most people will say half-jokingly that their sympathies are with Martha. After all, there is so much to be done. We lead such busy lives. While it might be nice to sit at Jesus' feet and hear his word, we really haven't got time and it's not fair on those of us who do have work to do if other people sit about doing nothing. Not least is this true in the Church. There are so many things to do from cutting the grass to polishing the brass. There's music to be arranged, finances to be sorted out, bells to be rung, rotas to be drawn up, meetings to go to. And when we've done all that, there's still pastoral care and evangelism to think about, not to mention community engagement. Some people even demand rather crossly, What would Jesus say if, when He and Mary had finished their tête à tête, there was no dinner on the table? They make Jesus sound like one of those gormless men in television advertisements which ironically employ apparent male helplessness and hopelessness to sell products that facilitate jobs like washing and cleaning which were formerly the preserve of women.

Before we flock to Martha's side, however, and dismiss Mary as a timewaster, perhaps we should consider Who it was Who said, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken from her. It was the Son of God. St Paul had a good deal to say about Who Jesus is in our Colossians reading – *the image of the invisible God...by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, ... he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church...having made peace through the blood of his cross.* The teaching of Jesus is not to be dismissed glibly and half-jokingly. If Jesus said that Mary had chosen the good part, the one thing needful, when she sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word, dare we think that we know better when we side with Martha? Surely Jesus knows what He is talking about!

I was somewhat surprised the other week when someone said to me that she had never heard me preach on spending time with Jesus. I suppose I rather took it for granted that this is something which Christians do or at least that it is something which Christians know that they ought to do. I was amazed a few years ago when I quoted Bartley Trimble, former Vicar of Halling, who had written in the parish magazine that Christians should pray and read the Bible every day and come to Communion at least every Sunday. I said that, nothing surely had changed since he left Halling in 1954 (the year I was born) and that I would definitely say the same thing today. The reason I was amazed was because someone, a member of our congregation, said that I had no right to say that. I had thought (and still think and always will think) that this is exactly what, as a Christian minister, I should be saying. Pray and read the Bible every day. On the Lord's day, join the Lord's people in the service the Lord gave us. *Do this in remembrance of me.*

So when do we find time to spend with Jesus? It is true that He is with us all the time. He accompanies us throughout life's journey. We can talk to Him all the time, whatever we are doing, wherever we are. I do think, however, that we need to set aside time when we focus on Him, concentrate on Him. What can be done at any time often turns out to be something which is never actually done at all. It is important to sit at Jesus' feet and hear his words.

My parents prayed with me when they put me to bed. That's an excellent thing to do with children and it puts adults as well in the right frame of mind for a good night's rest. Cast all your cares on him. *For so he giveth his beloved sleep*, as the psalmist says. The drawback with that plan is that, if I pray in bed, I tend to fall asleep while still praying. So usually I just stick to, *Into thy hands I commend my spirit, for thou has redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of truth*, when I'm actually in bed, unless I can't sleep and then I might pray about whatever is worrying me or count my blessings or pray for people who are worse off than I am, like the homeless lying out on some cold, hard pavement rather than in a comfortable warm bed. So usually I say what I call my family prayers before I go upstairs at night. My more formal prayers and bible-reading are based around Morning and Evening Prayer each day in church. You can join me if you like. I was pleased when someone, who doesn't actually come to church, said that she felt a connection with God and His Church and the life of prayer when she was out in the mornings with her dog and heard the bell ringing for Morning Prayer. You can use these prayers at home if you wish. You may have the books, the old prayer book or the new one, or you can find them online. The Church of England website does all the work for you, finding the readings and collects. The reason I produce the daily bible reading notes is to encourage you to read the Bible. I tend to have our churches in mind when I draw them up. So I hope they are relevant. There are other bible reading schemes you can use. Or just open your bible and get on with reading it. It is the Word of God and it will speak to you.

Some people prefer to have their "quiet time", as evangelicals tend to call, it or "meditation", as catholics call it, first thing in the morning – maybe before the rest of the household gets up. There's something magical about the freshness in the air at the beginning of the day. You might keep your quiet time by yourself or you might hold family prayers. It would be good to do both. Housewives sometimes find that the best time to pray is when everybody else has gone to work or school. I heard of one woman recently who takes a walk in the woods as the best place to be alone with God. I was talking a little while ago to a young man out for a run. He told me that, when he got to Holly Hill, he'd say a prayer and then run back. I think the beauty of the countryside and the sheer joy of running gave him inspiration.

You can prayer where you like and in any words you like or with no words at all. In one way, it's not important. *Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him*. Jesus is praying with us and for us. The Holy Spirit is praying with us and for us. *Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered*. You may, however, use words that other people have written or pray the Bible, especially the psalms. It isn't hard to pray. God longs to hear our prayers and we all have access to Him in Jesus Christ our Lord. The only limits on our prayers are set by our knowledge of Jesus. Would Jesus pray this prayer? If not, surely I cannot pray this prayer through Him and in His Name and there is no other access to the Father. How can I judge what Jesus would pray? Simply by the fact that His nature is love.

I know we've often had this, but the acronym ACTS is a good guide to prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Just start by loving God. Adore Him. Think Who Jesus is and what He has done, Who God is, Who the Spirit is. Just spend time in His

Presence as you like to spend time in the presence of the people you love. You can meditate on His Names or His attributes. Today's New Testament lesson is a good start. So are many collects and hymns. *Jesu, my shepherd, brother, friend, my Prophet, Priest, and King, my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring...Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* As we meditate on the holiness of God, the perfect beauty of His Love, we are naturally moved to confess our own unworthiness. *Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought.* So adoration leads to confession. In what respects do we not love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? In what respects do we fail to love our neighbours as ourselves? What have we left undone which we ought to have done and what have we done which we ought not to have done? What may other people justly have against us? We can try to put things right where we know we are doing wrong, to make peace with people whom we have offended. We can ask God's forgiveness for the ways in which we have offended Him. We know that He hears our prayers and we know that He forgives everyone who comes to Him in penitence and faith. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.* From adoration and confession to thanksgiving. We have so much to be thankful for from the quotidian (The sun rose this morning, I had a lovely walk with Tommy and a tasty and nourishing breakfast), to the eternally sublime (Jesus died for my sins and, through His grace and through His grace alone, I am a son of God who will finally be made like Him and enjoy the beatific vision of the blessed Trinity in all eternity). It's healthy to be thankful. And so finally to supplication. You can ask God anything in the Name of Jesus. The only limit to what you can ask is the limit of your love. So you can pray for yourself and for your family, for your church and for your neighbours, for the things you read about in the newspapers and hear on TV. Whatever you care about, bring it to Him in prayer.

All those things about which we can talk to God. Don't let's forget to listen to Him.

And finally, why so many Marthas and so few Marys? I don't think that the answer is really that we don't have time for God. We have plenty of time for all sorts of fairly pointless activities. I've no doubt at all that we can find time to pray everyday and read the Bible if we want to and most of us have no good reason not to come to Communion at least every Sunday. I think the real problem is that it is too overwhelming to be alone in the Presence of God. God is the ultimate reality and reality is scary. To confront God is to confront ourselves and maybe we aren't very comfortable with the people we are. When it says in the psalm, *Be still then, and know that I am God,* it is a two edged sword. Yes, it means that we can rest in Him. We can trust Him with our lives. But, on the other hand, our own shortcomings are shown up. We can't rely on ourselves. There is a void to fill with activity because we can't face what the silence might reveal. But activity for the sake of keeping busy is a fool's paradise. It is spending money for that which is not bread, your labour for that which satisfieth not. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. We should stop resisting Him and allow Him to direct our lives. *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.*

Cuxton: A&M 122

Halling: SoF 194.