

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : July 21st, 2019  
“Fifth Sunday after Trinity”

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**Trinity 5 2019**

“No, you can’t go backwards – you can only go forwards”. Such was an agonised shout I heard recently, when an expensive vintage Aston Martin was being manoeuvred in the tight space of a car park. “You can’t go backwards you can only go forwards” – that made me reflect. At one level it reminded me when I was learning to drive – and of my instructor who drummed into me the 3 letters MSM: mirror, signal, manoeuvre. I’m convinced this isn’t taught any longer – well, judging by the number of motorists who suddenly decide to pull out or turn left or right with no indication whatsoever!

Yet at another level human beings all spend a great deal of time looking back. Back to the past, often a past that we only now view through those spectacles that are of a rose colour. Speaking personally, I don’t much like looking back, going back – because all too often the memories are shattered by what we see. For that reason I am never keen to attend reunions, unless I am certain that there are people who I might be glad to see again or the places will continue to bring good memories. But because we can’t foresee the future all we frequently can do is look back to the past – yet often at the expense of forgetting to enjoy the present moment. Of course it goes without saying that there are many times when it is appropriate to commemorate what has gone before, for it can well be the foundation of what we enjoy in the present. So it is quite right to celebrate the 160<sup>th</sup>

anniversary of this church or the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first man on the moon. It is quite right that next Sunday morning we shall be welcoming Chris and Veronica Watts, now living in Dorking, who were married here at Christ Church 50 years ago. It is quite right to remember people who have made a difference to our lives and the lives of those around them. In the wider church it's also good to remember the saints down the ages by whose lives we have perhaps been encouraged in our journeys as disciples.

This morning in our first reading, we hear Paul in his letter to the Colossians reminding his hearers and readers of the fundamental message of the new Christian faith as he tries to encourage them to move forward, to look ahead to what is to come, saying "You must continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. For it is Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me".

Then in our Gospel reading we are reminded of that story of Mary and Martha as Jesus encourages his disciples to learn the best way so that they can grow in faith. As an aside there's lots of uncertainty around which Mary is being referred to here. Some view her as Mary Magdalene (whose feast day falls tomorrow). But perhaps it doesn't really matter. What does matter is what Jesus, through Luke, is trying to say to us. The story is sometimes used by people to pose the definitive question 'Are you a Mary or a Martha'? In other words are you an active busy person or someone who is more reflective, perhaps even spiritual? I was myself once asked exactly that question at interview – and though it stumped me a bit I think I replied: well, I'm probably by nature more of a Martha but am always aiming to be more of a Mary.

In other words I think we all have the capacity to be both Mary and Martha and that is what we should aim to become. We can be a person who isn't afraid of hard work but also one who is also readily capable of being still and thoughtful. People sometimes get upset by today's Gospel because they think that Jesus is saying that everyone ought to spend their time listening like Mary and that busy, practical people like Martha aren't somehow as worthwhile. But of course Jesus isn't saying that at all.

Susan Sayer puts it like this "Jesus' own life was full of work and activity, travelling, preaching, teaching and healing and none of that would have got done if he hadn't be a doer. But he also spent hours late at night or early in the morning on his own with God, talking things over and quietly listening. And he knew this was a really important part of the doing as he tried to move the disciples forward. He knew that all human beings need to keep the right balance – and on that particular visit to Mary and Martha, the listening was more important than the doing". In other words there is a time and a place....

The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it like this: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to harvest;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

And Jesus would probably have added "a time to work, and a time to be still".

So let me leave that thought with you as we start the weeks of summer – when there might be a bit of time in which we can find space, make space to

think about the balance of our lives between work/busyness and quiet reflection/ prayer. And as we think about that, hold onto the story of Mary and Martha – as we all try to move forward in our Christian lives and grow in faith and in holiness.