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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 17th July 2022

SERMON : TRINITY 5

In chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel, there are three strands which all relate to the theme of discipleship – to the question of what does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? Firstly, as the disciples are sent out two by two, they have to learn to give up status and become like children, to accept outsiders and to refuse the temptation to retaliate. Secondly, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Jewish lawyer has to learn to listen to the law which on his own understanding was meant to foster the love of God and all people. Then, towards the end of the chapter, we have this little incident, one with which many people are familiar – a lovely personal story.

But before we explore it, a question. I wonder how many of you have ever undertaken a personality test? Many years ago, when I worked in an ecumenical team of clergy in Milton Keynes, together we underwent a Myers Briggs analysis. Some of you might be familiar with it or might have done another similar test. The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator is “a self-reporting questionnaire indicating differing psychological preferences” in how a group of people might understand the world and come to make decisions. The test attempts to assign four categories: introversion or extraversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, judging or perceiving. Its results enormously helped all of us clergy better understand how we functioned individually and made for a more coherent and united team. So it is that in a very simple and fundamental way I have always thought that the story of Martha and Mary is a bit of a test of how human beings' function. So, something for us to ponder this morning: are we a Martha or a Mary? And just to my right are our two beautiful stained-glass images of Martha and Mary to help us in our reflection.

It seems that these sisters were good friends of Jesus and he often went round to the home where they lived in Bethany with their brother Lazarus. On this day, the

sisters welcomed Jesus into their home, the one distracted by the burden of hospitality whilst the other, oblivious to its demands, sits listening at Jesus' feet.

It is clear that what Mary most liked to do was to sit and listen to Jesus – in fact she could probably have sat and listened to him for hours. It is highly probable she may well have been the sort of person people could easily talk to, because they could see she was interested in them. Mary's idea of cooking a meal was probably beans on toast and she wouldn't have noticed the dust till she could write her name in it.

What Martha liked best, on the other hand, was doing things for people and making sure they had clean shirts and well-cooked meals. Her idea of cooking a meal would be something like roast chicken with all the trimmings. If you wanted something done, you'd ask Martha.

Like so many of the stories of Jesus, this one is puzzling. We would probably agree that it is all very well for Mary to sit at Jesus' feet but the beds still need making and the dinner still needs cooking. But, when Martha complains, Jesus rebukes her, and says 'there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' It is hardly surprising that people get upset about this because they think Jesus is saying that everyone ought to spend their time listening like Mary, and that busy, practical people like Martha somehow aren't as good. Indeed, we might well have sympathy with Martha, suffering the rebuke of Jesus.

But Jesus didn't mean to cause offence. His own life was full of work and activity, preaching, teaching and healing, and none of that would have got done if he hadn't been a doer. But he also spent time, often late at night or early in the morning, on his own with God, talking things over and quietly listening. And Jesus knew that this being was a really crucial part of the doing. He knew he had to keep the right balance between being and doing, between having to transmit and receive. On that visit to Martha and Mary, the listening was probably more important than the doing.

So perhaps the lesson for us all is to notice when we need to listen and be ready, sometimes, to stop what we're doing and just listen. All of us know the importance of setting aside a quiet time to be with God every day. It doesn't have to be long but it has to be there. Spending time quietly with God is not an optional extra for people who have time on their hands – it's an absolute necessity. It's why it is important to take time in church for stillness, for quiet, as we prepare ourselves to worship God.

But it can be quite hard because it is not easy to rest and relax. In truth, of course, many of us are a mixture of Mary and Martha – and that is the ideal: to be like Mary

and Martha. For myself, I try hard to get the balance right. There is a lot of 'doing' in a priest's life – work, visits, preparing, administering, preaching and leading worship. But I know that if I don't make times of 'being' in each day, then I am fit for nothing.

So, can we all try to balance, if that is the right word, the demands of service to others and love and worship of God? We should remember that there is a time to be active and a time to be passive; there is a time for activity and there is a time for stillness; there is a time for being a Mary and there is a time for being a Martha.