

going inside
a sermon preached on the
ninth sunday after pentecost
17 July 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15, Colossians 1:15-29, Luke 10:38-42

Like last week's gospel, I think we can say that the essence of today's story is clear. These two sisters show us a picture of yet another aspect of the disciple's 'journey to Jerusalem'¹ – what supports it, and what thwarts it.

It is indeed possible to become so preoccupied with busyness – with the long list of things 'to do'; with fussing after so many details; putting on a 'good performance'; with proving one's worth by one's accomplishments. This is the state of being Jesus describes as 'being distracted by much service'.²

Experts on the ancient personality typing scheme known as the Enneagramme – which describes the human population in terms of nine types – say that the church is disproportionately populated by the number Two. Twos need to be needed – and need to be seen to be busy serving others, in order to feel affirmed. The problem for the Two is that their obsessive helping is a function of their own secret unacknowledged desire for reciprocity – that others will help them, will affirm them. And this fuels a bitter but mostly secret resentfulness, which occasionally boils over: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."³ Martha is the quintessential Two! Jesus' rebuke is loving, but remarkably firm!

Mary, by contrast, symbolises the necessary disposition required for the journey to Jerusalem: sitting at the feet of the Lord, listening, attending.⁴ This is the *one* thing alone that is necessary.⁵ All else is 'distraction by much service'. This attentiveness Jesus describes as the 'good part'.⁶

This state of single focussed attentiveness is what's required for a person to be able to see beneath the surface of life, to get beneath the frothy surface of life. This is to see the inside of reality, the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created...⁷ the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages... now revealed to God's saints."⁸

Of course, Middle Eastern hospitality requires giving due attention to the guest – so beautifully and famously illustrated in today's Hebrew Scripture.⁹ But Jesus teaches that the highest form of hospitality is not in fact a lot of busy service, but simply being fully present, in order to be able to get beneath the surface, to the depths. Abraham put on a good feast, but he did not know who he was receiving. Martha's problem is that her distractedness – and the consequent resentfulness – make her blind to the mystery of what is right in front of her. She cannot see beneath the surface; and this in fact spoils the service she does offer. Mary is *present* to the one to whom she offers hospitality.

Now I think that part of the difficulty we have with today's gospel is our tendency to unnecessarily set two things up as though they are alternatives. We should be very clear that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with 'service', with any of the individual tasks Martha is doing. Indeed, 'service' is necessary, vital to an ethical human community. 'Two' is an important aspect of every mature and healthy person. Of course we should not *choose* between service and prayer: these are not alternatives! I think this is to misunderstand today's gospel.

Reflecting on our own recent experience together, I think one of the impediments to last year's process of discernment was precisely this misunderstanding, projected rather unhelpfully onto the word 'contemplative'. Some of us thought that the 'C' word constitutes a one-sided religiosity, an alternative to service, a dangerous and lazy abdication of the responsibilities of Christian ethical duty. This, in spite of the widely circulated quote from no less an authority than the last Archbishop of Canterbury, whose words are worth hearing again in full today:

¹ Luke 9:51

² Luke 10:41 Greek: *pollhn diakonian pollēn diakonian*

³ Luke 10:40

⁴ Luke 10:39

⁵ Luke 10:42

⁶ Luke 10:42

⁷ Colossians 1:15

⁸ Colossians 1:26

⁹ Genesis 18:1-10

“Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”¹⁰

Now it strikes me that the Archbishop has simply adopted a theologian’s way of paraphrasing our today’s gospel teaching. Mary’s attentiveness is not merely ‘one kind of prayer’ – a sort of exotic option for a select few. Rather, this attentiveness to the one thing necessary is the key to all prayer, liturgy, art – *and ethics*. Jesus affirms Mary’s choice to adopt the contemplative stance which is necessary in order to see beneath the surface of everything we do, to the “mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages... now revealed to God’s saints”.

As I was reflecting on these things, someone sent me an Internet link to recent drone footage taken inside the Christchurch Cathedral.¹¹ Clicking on the link, I was transported back to September 2010, to the days immediately following the first seismic event in Christchurch, the earthquake that seemed to leave the city remarkably unscathed. From the outside, it appeared that St Luke’s – a very large volcanic stone and brick Victorian Gothic structure, not much smaller than the Cathedral – had sustained only a little damage to two of the four gable tops. I confess that my instinctive reaction revealed a great deal about me: ‘We’ll just brace up those gable tops, and cover the holes where stone has fallen, then we’ll be back worshipping in the old girl in a matter of days!’ You see, from the outside, superficially, the structure looked so big, so sturdy, so impressive, and so seemingly unaltered. This superficial view was however completely illusory.

Going inside revealed an entirely different story. What could only be seen from the inside were the sizeable horizontal displacements in structural columns, and the vast networks of cracking in load-bearing walls. The inside view demanded a complete and total re-think. We never went back into that building: St Luke’s was the first Anglican church to be deconsecrated, and deconstructed.

I sense that this is why Jesus commends Mary in today’s story. Attention to the one thing necessary is the ‘going inside’ which reveals the inner truth, which deconstructs and re-orientates and sets free all our practical action.

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¹⁰ Rowan Williams, ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’, 10 October 2012. <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.bg3qTym6.dpuf>

¹¹ <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2016/07/drone-assesses-christchurch-cathedral-earthquake-damage.aspx>