

Chichester Cathedral
Seventh Sunday after Trinity, 11.00am Eucharist, 18 July 2010

Hearing the Gospels in bite size chunks can be misleading. From the four verses of Luke we heard this morning, it seems quite clear we're meant to contrast Mary and Martha. Many commentators describe them as contrasting and complementary models of the Christian life: one of Christian activism, the other of Christian contemplation. I want to suggest to you this does not hold up if we attend closely to the text, and moreover the real contrast intended by Luke is not between Martha and Mary, but between Mary and the lawyer we heard about last week; the lawyer Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So what does today's text actually say? First we hear about Martha, who must be the leader of the household, as it she who extends hospitality to Jesus, and welcomes him into her home. She may be the leader, but she's also the one with the responsibility. Although we aren't explicitly told her 'many tasks' relate to preparing a meal, they almost certainly do, not least since the twice used Greek word *diakonos* has connotations of waiting at table. In this Martha is living out the kind of hospitality Abraham extended to his three mysterious visitors by the oaks of Mamre, although there also it was a woman (Sarah) who did most of the work.

We can only speculate about the sibling dynamic between Martha and Mary, with Jesus cast in the role of parent, 'Tell my sister to come and help me.' How galling to be told your sister is in the right; not just partly right but entirely right, for Jesus says there is need only of the 'one thing' that Mary is doing. And what is this 'one thing'? It is quickly stated: 'Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.'

I suspect many, perhaps most of you, will sympathize with Martha. 'Distracted by many tasks' is a description of wide application! She, after all, is working her socks off to get everybody fed, and Jesus apparently doesn't value what she's doing. But can Jesus really be saying that activity, doing, in this case the work involved in hospitality, is unimportant, and that sitting and listening is all?

This, as I said earlier, is the trouble with bite sized chunks of Gospel. For if you read Luke from beginning to end, the importance of both *hearing* and *doing* the word is hard to overemphasize. A few examples: in Luke chapter six Jesus talks of the importance of building on solid foundations, and says 'I will you show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.' Luke 8.21, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' Luke 11.28, 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.'

And then we have last weeks Gospel, the Good Samaritan. A tried and tested principle for reading Scripture, especially passages that puzzle, is to look at them in relation to what comes just before and after. Well, just before Mary and Martha we hear the account of the lawyer who answers his own question to Jesus (about eternal

life) by citing the commandments to love God and neighbour. Jesus then offers the Samaritan as model of what this means, as he binds up the wounds of the victim, carries him to the inn and pays the costs. The four words just preceding today's passage are these, 'Go and *do likewise*.'

The lawyer has been listening, as Mary does, but it seems that listening must lead to doing. If it doesn't, it becomes a mockery of what has been heard. The corollary is that doing *without listening* can easily degenerate into busyness that has lost its purpose. Here is the importance of the repeated word 'distracted' as applied to Martha. Understandably enough, her activity has left her disconnected with what it is all for, and this is what Jesus challenges.

In a way Martha is the perfect paradigm for today's hectic world, full of tasks and busyness and worries and distractions. But to what purpose, and how much listening is going on in all this, and who is worth listening to anyway?

Standing here, six feet above contradiction, it is tempting to be glib: 'What this world needs is the example of Mary; to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to him.' Needless to say, I'd hardly be in this pulpit if I didn't believe in the centrality of listening to Christ. But doing this today is not straightforward. After all, Mary and Martha experienced Jesus as a living individual presence they could see, like a human friend or neighbour. It is not like that for us. Nor was it the experience of Paul, who writes about Jesus in very different terms: 'the image of the invisible God... the head of the church... the firstborn from the dead.'

Paul knows Jesus as the resurrected one, the one 'who made peace through the blood of the cross'. That is, after he has been betrayed and left to die alone, he returns as the source of grace and hope to his treacherous and fearful friends. Through his risen power, those fearful disciples are formed into a new community, a new Israel. This community is founded on nothing but the holiness and forgiveness of the risen Christ. This community has no boundaries of culture or race or language because it is not founded over against anything else, but is purely given.

I am speaking here not only of the earliest Christian communities in Jerusalem and Ephesus and Colossae, but also of Chichester in 2010. This community here and now is formed around the real presence of Christ, known above all in the Eucharist – if we are not too distracted, and have open eyes, ears and hearts to perceive and to receive Him! This is the context for listening to Jesus today, for learning what he would have us do, and for having our lives transformed by him.

I suggested that Martha's busyness and distractions were a paradigm for today's world, where all kinds of voices clamour for attention. But if we, as participants in the new community of Christ's church, make the effort (like Mary) to listen to him, what might he be saying to us? Let's begin with the language of 'fullness' and 'riches' that Paul uses. In Jesus, we hear, the 'fullness of God dwells', as do the

‘riches of his glory’. If we’re listening properly, this language of fullness and abundance is to be heard right through the Gospels. For example at the wedding at Cana, following Jesus’ intervention, there is far too much wine – more than 120 gallons. At the feeding of the five thousand, there is too much food – twelve whole baskets of leftovers. The hospitality of Jesus’ table fellowship seems to have no limits either, as prostitutes and tax collectors and lepers are all included. The problem with Jesus, it seems, is the opposite of the usual human complaint – not too little, but too much. Not famine, or subsistence, but abundance. Too much drink, too much food, too much love.

This may be a hard notion to take in. We are used to thinking about the world in terms of scarcity, whether of information or resources. We don’t know enough about the climate, or how to prevent wars, bring people out of poverty, or manage an economy. And, in a time of cutbacks, we certainly don’t have enough resources; to pay off our national debt, to feed the world’s poor, to provide proper education for everybody everywhere.

If we think human life is all about scarcity, and that seems to be the predominant message of a time of austerity, perhaps we don’t have sufficient imagination to take in all that God is, and all that God gives: an extraordinary world to inhabit, reasons for living that endure, inexhaustible mercy and love, a future with Him. And God in Christ, the risen Christ, has given the new community of Church, which for all its faults, embodies his gifts in its practices and its life.

Of course there is plenty of poverty in our world. But this is about more than not having enough food or material resources. Poverty is at its worst when people have no idea what to do, and no one to do it with. That is, poverty is at its worst when there is no imagination, and no community. You could do worse than define the Church as a ‘community of imagination’ for these things are foremost amongst the abundant gifts God gives.

A practical example: is famine in the Sudan to be solved by focussing on scarcity, or abundance? If scarcity, the solution is to make more food. But the world is not short of food, the issue is sharing the food we already have. That this does not happen is an affront to God, whose purpose is for all people to flourish in abundant life with him. Listening to Christ, we realize afresh just how much needs to be done.

To worship in God’s church, is to be given everything one needs to follow Christ. It is to be given the chance, like Mary, to sit at his feet and listen to him. It is to belong to a community that subverts all other forms of belonging, for it is not founded on any form of tribalism, and it has no earthly city, but is nourished only on the abundant love and self-sacrifice of Christ, and the Kingdom to which he pointed. If we listen to him in the midst of our Martha-like distractions and worries, and if we learn where to look, the things that really matter overflow abundantly: community, imagination, friendship, hospitality, eating together. The Church is here to help us live out of this abundance, for the sake of those who do not yet share it. AMEN