

Eucharist 21.7.19

Genesis 18 1-10a; Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 10.38-end

There was a story which appeared in the press on Friday under the headline ‘Heavy Drinkers get vicar’s blessing to lie in on a Sunday.’ It’s a story about a church near Maidstone which noticed that Sunday has now become a principal family activity day. The Vicar said that many people told him that they take their children to sport activities on Sunday morning, or go to markets. Other people told him that they needed to recuperate from a night out on Saturday. So, it has been announced that in future there would also be a service there at 4 o’clock on Sunday afternoons.

One local resident commented: ‘At last, someone with a bit of sense. Getting up to go to church when you have a raging hangover is no fun at all – the only problem is that it will clash with the football now.’ I hope the unnamed local resident wasn’t the Curate, but whoever it was, the approach does sound to me a little like wanting to have your cake and eat it. And one of the questions we might want to ask, and we can ask it of ourselves too, is as what point does being a Christian called to worship override other concerns we may have? And at what point does paying attention to the Lord sitting quietly at his feet and listening, become a priority for us, or is it something else to fit to a busy schedule?

The incident described in today’s gospel has been taken to provide some guidance on this question. As we heard, Mary sat attentive at the Lord’s feet, hanging on his every word while Martha, the host whose home Jesus was visiting ‘was distracted by her many tasks’. Martha complained bitterly about being left to do all of the work by Mary, but Jesus described Mary’s attention as ‘the better part which shall not be taken away from her.’

In the Middle Ages this passage was taken to indicate the Lord’s approval of the contemplative life over and above an active life of doing things, and more recently some scholars have argued that ‘the good part chosen by the spiritual Mary over the worldly Martha, was the kingdom of God.

I’m not sure that either of those views will do, because they manage not to notice that Mary’s sitting, listening at Jesus’s feet was a really radical, revolutionary thing to do. To sit at the feet of the Rabbi was men’s business, not women’s and women then would not have sat with men to whom they were not related. A cultural taboo was shattered by Mary and by Jesus.

The opportunity which Martha missed was to be similarly radical. The task which she was involved in, preparing food for guests, was neither trivial or insignificant, and yet either because she was so wrapped up in it or because she was so culturally conditioned it didn’t occur to her that sitting at Jesus’ feet was an option. She allowed what she was doing to distract her from the possibility of sitting at Jesus’ feet.

The biblical scholar Paula Gooder says of this story: ‘there is a vital distinction between fully engaging in the ordinary tasks to which was called in the expectation that there was can meet

God and between coming so distracted by those tasks that we risk missing the unexpected encounters God places in our path. It isn't what we do that affects this, but how we do it.

'Teach me, my God and King
In All things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee'

wrote George Herbert, or perhaps even more appropriate as we bring this year's Southern Cathedral's Festival to an end on this the last Sunday of the choir's year is the hymn which we sang at yesterday's Festival Eucharist:

When in our music God is glorified
and adoration leaves no room for pride
it is as though the who whole creation cried
Halleluja.

And it is with creation's hallelujah which we join each time music is made here to God's glory, the eternal rhythms and the harmonies of heaven resonate with us as we join our songs with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, in songs of everlasting praise. That is the context in which we come here day by day and week by week to join the songs of everlasting praise.

The other context in which we do this is the context of the loud clamour of student voices which compete for our attention. Matthew Paris commented again in yesterday's Times newspaper on the political situation in this country and said: 'So a word to those estimable but weary souls who still seek respite from battle. There is no respite. Whatever happens this battle must intensify.' And even if we do not agree with his assessment, we can see and indeed hear the political circumstances which gave rise to them. And if we add to that the transatlantic voices which speak insistently, the noise from the seaways near Iran and the consequences of what is happening there, then it would not be unfair to claim that the background noise of opinion and comment is enough, if we let it, to drown out not only the celestial harmonies, but also the voice of the poor and hungry and dispossessed who cry out for justice.

O hush your noise ye men of strife
and hear the angels sing.

The Southern Cathedrals Festival this year in Chichester has been exceptionally good and it has been a privilege to be involved, and to bask in the reflected glory of a remarkable series of concerts, service and hospitality events. It has been especially good thanks to the hard work of many, many people, a huge team effort involving musicians, vergers, administrative staff, clergy colleagues, hospitality and catering staff, the Cathedral Friends, stewards, volunteers, school staff, sponsors, patrons, colleagues from three Cathedrals working hard together to produce something remarkable (I'm sure I've missed someone out, forgive me if it's you.)

I hope that in all that business, those who gave us this Festival were also able to share some of the experience of, in a sense, sitting at Jesus' feet, as they led us in music and worship, and joined our hearts and our minds with creation's Halleluja.