

Homily St Hugh's 17 July

Genesis 18.1-10a, Colossians 1.15-28, Luke 10.38-end
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We have two stories of hospitality involving receiving either God or God's messengers as our guest, for our readings today, but each in different ways seems very like a visit or a mealtime that perhaps we would all rather not have, much of what goes on is unspoken or impenetrable to the modern outsider.

Because we do not have enough information about what is going on, or what has gone on already, for either of them immediately to make sense as we read them. It takes some research, some memory of what has gone before in each case and good imagination, to see or to work out what we might learn from them.

I want to focus on Martha and Mary because their situation seems to speak more to our situation today, rather than Abraham and Sarah because the stories are so very different. Abraham in particular, and Sarah, have several encounters with God, about God's promise' and its fulfilment, of descendants for Abraham and this is just a small part of a complicated story which is ongoing, we join it mid promise so to speak.

Martha and Mary on the other hand have been used to demonstrate different aspects of our responses to God and how to live the life of faith, and their encounter with Jesus in this chapter of Luke has generated unhelpful stereotypes as well interesting possibilities and questions about choice. I have chosen to speak about them today, because to speak about both passages and do them both justice would take too long, but on another day I might choose differently.

The sisters have sometimes been seen as opposites, one active, and one contemplative, representing two different ways of living the Christian life. Either as activists, who on the one hand, in compassion, lovingly try to make things better for their brothers and sisters, or on the other hand those who vainly try to earn their salvation by good works, or again contemplatives who seek first God's presence above all other things but are so heavenly minded as to be uselessly impractical. Or they have been seen by others as stereotypes - Martha as assertive and active and Mary as contemplative and submissive, and then find it strange that Jesus should apparently scold one and praise the other.

It makes no sense to look at them like this. Jesus clearly values both

activity and contemplation in bringing about God's kingdom – in this chapter of Luke alone he has already sent out 70 disciples on active missionary journeys and commended to the young lawyer the life of love for God and for neighbour, which will both involve prayer and contemplation, as well as loving action to bring in the kingdom of God. It is not a question of either or but, rather of both, prayer and contemplation and actions like those of the Good Samaritan whose story of helpful action he has just told to illustrate to the young lawyer who one's neighbour really is.

So what happened in the home of Martha and Mary?

Jesus came to visit them, unusual for those times to have a man visiting two women, neither of whom was their wife. His visit is a recognition that they were important to him and his words were possibly urgent.

Martha welcomed Jesus, offers hospitality, and then it seems went to prepare a meal. Mary sat at his feet and listened to him

That is the image we all know and remember. Mary taking the position of disciple sitting silently, listening at his feet and Martha suddenly angry that Mary is not helping her to prepare, so she demands that Jesus should basically tell her off. She is so angry she cannot give proper gracious attention to her guest, and completely embarrasses her sister, in fact, she seems to drive a wedge between the three of them.

I feel as if I know that feeling, so much to do, so little time and no one to help, so she gets anxious, worried and distracted, just as I do, and if you tell me to keep calm, I get angry. And we all know the pressures of busy lives and many demands.

Jesus knows all this too, so he both understands Martha, and affirms Mary

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.

Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. ***And the implication of his words is that***

The one thing needed is for Martha, as well as Mary to receive the gracious presence of Jesus, to listen to his words, to know that she is valued not for what she does or how well she does it, but for who she is as a child of God, and to recognise just who Jesus is –

Jesus according to Paul in his letter to the Colossians “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible...*because he goes on*.... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things...*why*...because in him all the fullness of God

was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things” ***and he is visiting them now – he is in their home sharing himself and his message with them***

Jesus has already turned to go to Jerusalem by this stage in Luke’s gospel towards betrayal, arrest, trial, and death on the Cross. So, time is short, and Martha needs to attend to Jesus’s words whilst he is still here, to seize the opportunity because hearing the word of God’s messenger is the one thing needed at that time, in that place. We do not know if she succeeded because...

the situation is left unresolved, the chapter ends, the story moves elsewhere .

We should not therefore, conclude from this story that we should all be like Mary, and not Martha, but rather that time and context are really important when choosing how to respond to things.

Jesus is saying to us that choices matter. Our choices shape who we are, how we respond, grow and develop. Our choices make a difference. In this particular context Mary made the better choice but it was a choice for that time, that place, and those circumstances.

Mary and Martha show us two different ways of being present and open to God. Both ways are necessary, faithful, and holy. There is not simply one choice to be made for ever and always. We are always to be discerning ‘the one thing’ needed in this time, this place, these circumstances. What is ‘the better part’ given our/this particular situation? How do we become present, aware of and responsive to the divine presence that is already with us and always before us? That’s the question for us.

What is the ‘one thing needed’ that will keep us awake, aware, open, receptive, and present to Christ in our/any situation now? We should choose that. That is the ‘better part’ for now but there will be another choice to be made after that, and another after that one. We choose our way into life, love, relationships, faith, and even salvation, and the choices matter.

Let us ask for God’s grace to make good choices. Amen