

Sermon for Sunday 17 July 2022 – The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Genesis 18.1-10a; Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 10.38-end

Let us pray. Father, by your Holy Spirit, would you open your word to our hearts and minds. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated.

Some of you, may know that a sign used to hang over the kitchen sink of the late Ruth Bell Graham. If you don't know who Ruth was, she was the wife of the evangelist Billy Graham. And the sign over her kitchen sink said this: 'Divine service will be conducted here three times daily', and throughout the Gospel and Acts that Luke authored, he portrays hospitality in a positive light. So why, at first glance, Jesus' apparent criticism of Martha?

Firstly, some background points. As I've said a few weeks running now, we've passed the pivot point in Luke's gospel, where he recounts Jesus' ministry around Galilee, and Jesus has turned, as Luke 9.51 says, to face Jerusalem, turned his face to Jerusalem and that long way to the cross.

But Luke has arranged his material to suit his purpose in writing. We know this because the village where Mary and Martha live, we know from John's Gospel, is Bethany, and that's a mile and a half east of Jerusalem. So Luke here is using artistic licence, and arranging his material thematically, not geographically or chronologically, that's the first thing to know.

The second is, Luke, throughout his gospel and Acts often uses gender pairings, male and female – you'll have one account with a male involved and a second account with a female involved, both on the same subject. So we get in the birth narrative, Zachariah and Elizabeth, we get Mary and Joseph, we get Simeon and Anna. And moving on, we have the healing of the possessed man and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the healing on the Sabbath of the crippled woman and the man with dropsy, and so on. The women at the empty tomb and Peter at the empty tomb. And in Acts, the conversion of Lydia and the jailer.

And here, although we only heard part of it today - we heard the first part last week – second part this week. We have the lawyer, male and Martha, female, and they are both concerned about doing rather than being. If you weren't here last week, you may find it helpful to go to the church website, listen to the sermon or read it. When these gender pairings occur, it's important we take notice of the parallels or the contrasts.

So we have Martha. She seems to be the head of the household. Her name would imply that; she's also the one that welcomes Jesus, she's the one who offers hospitality. Mary, as mentioned, as a sister, so probably younger, for some reason their brother Lazarus, that we know of John's Gospel, isn't in the picture at all.

If we go a bit earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had sent his disciples out to the towns and cities that he planned to visit with instructions to accept hospitality where it was offered. So here we see Jesus doing the same; an itinerant teacher being invited to teach in a house, and being offered hospitality, to have his needs met. Different to the man who had been robbed, but needs being met all the same. Do you start to see the connection between the parable of the man who fell among robbers, that we know as the Good Samaritan, and the reading that we heard today? And Jesus sits down to teach the customary position for a rabbi, for a teacher, as he did in the synagogue at Nazareth. And one person in particular, Mary, counterculturally, because she is a female, she is sitting in the position of a disciple, a position of submission. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Martha is in the kitchen, fretting. We're told that she is distracted by her many tasks, her many services. It's 'diacona', where we get the word servant from.

I don't know about you, but I can think of one or two people, friends and family, where I've been invited for coffee, or a drink, or a meal. And I've felt like I'm sort of entertaining myself and hosting myself, because the person that's hosting me is more wrapped up in preparing the food and drink than being with me, the guest. Has anybody had that experience? And you come away thinking, that would be a just so much nicer evening if they hadn't done a seven course meal and spent more time with me, or they just stuck a couple of ready meals in the microwave and spent time with me. But because they're overly anxious, they're not able to offer real hospitality.

This is Martha. She's worrying about everything she needs to do to host Jesus. I wonder how Jesus felt. And Martha's getting annoyed with Mary for not helping. But notice she didn't complain to Mary – a bit of triangulation going on – she complains to Jesus, the guest; 'Lord, do you not care that **my** sister has left **me** to do all the work by **myself**? Tell her to help me.' My, me, myself - Martha has lost focus on the purpose of hospitality. The purpose of hospitality, much like the Samaritan in what he did, is for the other, not the person that is doing the doing. Her concern is about everything she has to do. Notice the similarity with the lawyer's question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' This is the point that Luke is making.

Martha's focused on herself, not on her guests. And Jesus response is, Martha, Martha; this is not a scolding – I was talking to Peter before the service about how to read this – I've heard people say it was such a scolding, harsh voice on the lips of Jesus; this is compassion, this is concern; 'Martha, what's going on'; his concern for Martha, concern that her approach is about doing, and that doing is causing her anxiety; but it's causing her to miss out on being with him, her guest.

Martha's missing the point; the same as the lawyer was. Mary, in contrast, is focused on Jesus. As the theologian Joel Green puts it, the better part that Mary has chosen is to be fixed on the guest, Jesus, and his words; she heeds the one whose presence is commensurate with the coming of the kingdom of God.

At this point, you might rightly be thinking, what about all the positive things about serving, about hospitality and practical tasks? Because if we follow Mary's example and just sit listening to the teaching, who's going to get the practical things done? It's the question I raised at the beginning, whether the

commendation of Mary implies a criticism of Martha. Is being a contemplative disciple at the feet of Jesus better than being practical and serving?

And like me, you may have heard that set up as the question before - I think it's a wrong question. The issue here is not about whether hospitality and practical service is to be discouraged, and study and listening encouraged. The issue is about motivation and focus.

Let's bring it right home, let rubber hit the road, as our American cousins would say. And apologies to visitors if I speak a little bit more about our situation here in Lavenham, but you may be able to take it and apply it to your own circumstances. And I'll also apologise if you think I'm overlaying my feelings about this as I've prepared onto you as the congregation. It's always a risk that somebody that's preaching takes.

But our Sunday services, our mid week services, the day to day work of keeping this building functioning involves many practical tasks. Sometimes the list seems endless. Some things are obvious, some things are not. Pointing no fingers, but the things we get involved in - the choir needs to be rehearsed, the numbers need to be put up on the hymnboards, get into the pew sheets. In the colder weather the timer needs to be set for the heating. The communion table needs to be set up, the books and booklets need to be given out; sermons need to be prepared, services need to be prepared, coffee needs to be prepared and served, the PCC needs to meet; and so on. They're all necessary and they're done as part of people's service here in this church.

But, the purpose of all these practical tasks, those many tasks like Martha had, are to create a place of hospitality where Jesus can be welcomed, where Jesus can be the focus. Friends, and I include myself in this, when we're preparing to provide the hospitality for Jesus that we do for our services and other events, we're creating a space where Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, can come and be our guest as we come together as a community of followers of Jesus.

Does our practical service enable us to show hospitality? Or are we distracted by the practicalities to the point that maybe we forget our guest? Are we distracted, as Jesus said to Martha, from the fact that he is present with us; and friends, don't hear me say that practical services are necessary, I'm not saying that. But this morning, can I encourage us all to not be preoccupied with practicalities? That we miss being present with our guest, the Lord Jesus. Amen.