

READING: *Colossians 1.15-28*

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Colossians.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL: [Luke 10.38-42](#)

Alleluia.

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Alleluia.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, '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.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

Sermon for 20th July 2025

May I speak...

This morning we read the story of Mary and Martha – a familiar one to many people, but perhaps new to some of us here. It's a story that was dear to many people over the years, but also troublesome. In my grandmother's kitchen there was a tea-towel with a quite bad poem about Mary and Martha on it, which I would recite to you, but I can only remember the first five lines. Instead, there's one particular detail which I think is worth dwelling on for a moment. It's exactly where Mary is described as being when Martha makes her complaint:

She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?

That phrase "Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet" should alert us that there is something more going on here. In fact, probably the most famous use those words, "at the feet of So-and-So", come in a speech made by the writer of today's first reading. When Paul spoke to the crowd in Jerusalem, in Acts 22, the report of his words begins like this:

Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you. (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence: and he saith,) I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day

(Acts 22)

You've probably noticed that Paul says he is Jewish, born in Cilicia but "brought up in this city", meaning Jerusalem, "at the feet of Gamaliel". It is no coincidence that Paul uses this phrase. It does not only mean the physical fact that he sat on the ground whilst the rabbi taught – it means that he sat in the closest position to the rabbi as a favoured pupil. A great deal of instruction in the Law was carried out by listening to a rabbi expounding the interpretation of the Bible, and by memorising his sayings so the students could repeat them in future. The student sitting right at the rabbi's feet was in a privileged position, both to learn and to repeat back to the rabbi what was said. If you dip into the Talmud, the great store of rabbinical learning and discussion, you will find that a large number of learned opinions are given with chains of attribution, for example:

Rabbi Simeon ben Pazzi said that Rabbi Joshu ben Levi said in the name of Bar Kappara, Whoever celebrates the Sabbath with three meals will be saved from three calamities

This kind of rabbinic quotation depends upon what we see in the passage -a student sitting at the feet of a teacher, remembering and repeating back their sayings, many of which will be sayings which the teacher themselves memorised at the feet of their own teacher. Elsewhere in the Talmud we find the phrase itself, when one line asks: “How could Rabbi Meir study Torah at the feet of [Elisha ben Abuyah] The Other?”

Thus today’s Gospel makes clear something which might not be evident to us today, and indeed which might not have been evident to Martha at the time. Mary is not helping with the domestic chores, or contributing to the effort of hosting Jesus. But she is not doing so in order to simply hang out with the guest of honour. She is not playing the bountiful lady of the house, like some first-century hyacinth Bucket. That may be what Martha sees as she hurries past, trying to arrange everything so the food will be cooked and the beds will have sheets on them. But Mary is sitting at the feet of her rabbi. In some weeks’ time another Mary will claim Jesus as her own rabbi. In the garden outside the tomb, Mary Magdalene will call him “rabbouni”, and the Gospel text will helpfully add a comment “which means Teacher”.

So Mary is not simply skiving off her chores in order to enjoy the presence of a guest. She is spending her time in serious and attentive devotion, listening to the words of salvation. Whilst Martha is honouring their visitor in the way she best understands – acting as a good hostess, chivvying others around her to get things sorted, straining her own efforts to make everything right – Mary is honouring that same guest in the way she thinks best.

This is a hard passage to reflect on, and a hard one to accept, for many of us. I don’t mean intellectually or theologically – though there are subtleties in it, it is not a particularly obscure episode. I think it is hard because it feels rather pointed, and even unfair. Because, not to indulge in answering back to the Gospel or to Jesus, actually a lot of stuff does have to be done. Especially in churches. The laundry needs doing, the boiler needs maintaining, the wafers and wine need ordering, the service sheets need writing, editing and printing, the accounts need recording, the DBSs need doing, and on and on it goes. The services which at their best can be so enjoyable and profound, require a large and expensive operation to run. Any organization does. And that’s not to even start on what Easter and Christmas involve. I don’t imagine Martha ever saw a Christingle in her life, but I bet she would have some pretty definite views on whether four hundred candles did or did not get into four hundred oranges by themselves. I think I would guiltily enjoy hearing those thoughts.

And beyond even the running of the churches, there is an awful lot of things which are done in the name of Jesus. Campaigning, activism, pressure groups, charitable initiatives, outreach. A lot of things happen round the edges of a church which take place because people's principles lead them to start something up. Again, I have a great deal of sympathy for, and often admiration for, those groups and those people. It seems hard that there is this little story in Luke's Gospel which criticizes them. Certainly any feminist reading this story might well be given pause by the way it seems to blame Martha for having all this work to do. It seems to suggest that the "mental load", as well as the duties of women's work, are a self-imposed burden for self-appointed martyrs, and that Mary has neatly opted out of them by being cleverer and kookier than her sister. A gospel for manic pixie dream girls. Not a lot of solidarity going on in this passage, it could seem.

And yet. When all that does have to be done, it has to be done with devotion and reverence. I think this is what the story reveals. It is so easy to be caught up in the chores which must be done for the sake of the church, and to let that distract us from the God whom we are serving in the church. We can persuade ourselves that the church is successful because we are feeling more put upon than usual.

We can become so involved in social activism run on Christian justifications that we let our own social principles eclipse the Christ whom we want to claim for them. And we can let ourselves do what Martha did – look at someone else and ask why they aren't busting a gut like us, why they get to sit around enjoying the nice bits of Christianity when we don't. It seems that this was Martha's great slip into error in the story: she got to the point of asking Jesus to send her sister away in order to help her do the work. She wished for another person to have a less close relationship with the Lord, to make herself feel better and securer. That has the air of a spiritually unwell person. If I find myself understanding Martha, I had better hope I can also see her flaws, and how what I find sympathetic in her also led her to that mistake.

So the story is a hard one, but a healthy one. It asks us to guard against obscuring Christ with all the things we do in Christ's name. It shows us a very sympathetic pair of sisters, with their own recognisable personalities and their own family dynamic, and asks us when the Church's own family works like this. It calls us back once again to the work of devotion and attention to God, what one writer has called the "passionate patience" of the Christian life. It reminds us that the gifts we give are sanctified not by our own efforts, but by the presence of the Christ to whom we offer them. And who has given us more than we can ever try to return.

Amen