

Sunday, July 18, 2010 Cycle C  
St. Paul's Cathedral, London, ON  
Luke 10:38-42

What a strange story! What on earth is going on here? Let's review the course of events.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops off to visit Mary and Martha at home. Now we know from John's Gospel and the story of the raising of Lazarus that Mary and Martha were a couple of Jesus' closest friends and that they lived in Bethany, which is just a couple of miles away from Jerusalem. They were Lazarus' sisters.

And so Jesus arrives at their home. Presumably he hasn't seen them for a while and he suddenly shows up with his twelve disciples and he is welcomed into their home by Martha, who begins to cook dinner for them.

Now, we like to show hospitality ourselves and we love having people for dinner. But to suddenly have 13 people turn up at the door one evening might give a serious challenge to the most hospitable of us.

But Martha is not phased by this: she has a real gift of hospitality. So she brings them inside and gets on with the business of cooking for them all. And whilst she beavers away in the kitchen her sister, Mary, chooses not to help her out! Instead, she sits down at Jesus' feet and listens quietly whilst he is teaching.

Well, after a while, Martha gets indignant about this and rather than pulling Mary to one side to tear a strip off of her privately, she goes into the room where Jesus and Mary and the disciples are and she has a go at Jesus! "Lord, don't you care that Mary has left me to do all the work by myself? Can't you tell her to get up and give a hand with all this cooking?"

So what should Jesus have done in this situation? He was caught in an embarrassing situation. Here he was, trying to teach his disciples – and Mary – about the ways of God before enjoying a nice relaxing meal. But now he is caught up in a tiff between two sisters. How would he deal with it? Whose side would he take?

Well, to the surprise of many people throughout the centuries since and, no doubt to the surprise of Martha on that night, Jesus takes Mary's side: “Martha, Martha,” Jesus says, “you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Now, to be honest, this seems like a surprising response by Jesus. Why does Jesus praise Mary – who seems to be doing nothing – over and above Martha who is simply trying to be a good host? It doesn't seem to make sense...surely Martha has done nothing wrong!

Well, there have been different interpretations of Jesus' response through the centuries.

Some have suggested that Luke had a problem with women in leadership and actually what he is doing is suggesting that Jesus criticized Martha for her activity and her pro-activity in taking a lead in this situation and praises Mary for staying passive and silent. But that doesn't seem very likely particularly because, of all the Gospel writers, Luke is the most pro-woman. It is in Luke's Gospel that we meet so many influential women of faith: Anna, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the women at the tomb, the persistent widow and so on...And anyway, having Mary sitting equally with the disciples would hardly support the view that women shouldn't be in a position of Christian leadership! So I don't think we have an anti-women in leadership agenda running here.

Maybe there's something else going on here.

But the other common interpretation is just as troublesome in my view. I'm referring to the idea that Jesus is commending contemplation over and above activity: that, if we want to grow spiritually, we need to stop Doing and start listening.

Now that approach alarms me – a lot! Suppose I stand here today and say “In order to grow spiritually, we need to stop doing and start listening”, what will happen? The Wardens may say, “We don't want to do the work of a Warden anymore: we just want to go to Bible Studies instead!” Tom might quit as property manager, saying “I'm dedicating myself to a life of contemplation instead!” Andrew would say, “No more organ-playing for me! It's time to pray more!”

If this is a story in which Jesus is telling the Do-ers to stop Doing, then we wouldn't have a Youth

Worker or Sunday School teachers or a choir or a Stewardship Committee. We'd just have one, very large prayer meeting instead!!

The truth is, of course, that there is a balance we need to strike between doing and listening. But, in getting that balance right we mustn't undervalue the importance of doing! The Christian faith is not primarily abstract or philosophical. The Christian faith is, first and foremost a relationship to be enjoyed and out of that, a lifestyle to be lived. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth: isn't that what we read in John's Gospel, we come face to face with the Doing God, not some far off distant deity who stays aloof from our world, lost in a conceptual world of thoughts and ideas. Balance between Doing and Listening is crucial to our spirituality, so surely Jesus is not criticizing Martha for 'doing'.

So what on earth is going on here? Well, I think the key to this passage is Jesus' comment to Martha: "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her".

A seemingly innocuous comment – and the traditional interpretation is that Jesus is somehow scolding Martha for choosing wrongly. But I don't think that's what's going on at all. Actually, I think Jesus has a twinkle in his eye at this point and he's making a gentle joke to help Martha understand what's really happening in her front room!

Let me explain...

Martha has been out in the kitchen. She's making the food and dishing up the dinner for 13 unexpected guests. And Jesus says to her, "Mary has chosen the better part..."

But actually, that isn't exactly what he says. What Jesus is actually saying is this: "Mary has chosen the better portion..." In Greek the word 'portion' is the same word that is used for a portion of food. So I think what Jesus is saying is this: "Martha, you are out in the kitchen worrying about portions of food. But the portion of food Mary is digesting in here is much more important!"

He's not scolding Martha. He's not saying that she is making the wrong choice by being busy. Instead, Jesus, with a twinkle in his eye, is comparing the relative value of bread for the stomach with bread for the soul! "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry."

This is not a story about the relative value of Doing versus Listening. This is not a story about the relative value of Activity versus Contemplation. This is a story in which Jesus points out that his teaching, the Word of God to us, is food for the soul that will bring us eternal life and the hope of salvation.

And so we are confronted by Jesus in this passage, not in a scolding fashion but with a twinkle in his eye as he says to each one of us..."Do you want to spend your life preparing food? Or do you want to have your life prepared by spiritual food – the bread of life?" "What do you value?"

And of course Mary is the example to us. She has chosen the better portion because she was feeding on the bread of life and wasn't really interested in the bread and olives in the kitchen!

And, as Jesus says, "That will not be taken away from her". And that, of course is the ultimate truth of this passage: that if we feed on the bread of life, we shall be blessed with an eternal relationship of bliss with God that will never be taken away from us.

Jesus says in John 10:10 that he has come so we may have life in all its fullness. We are to follow the example of Mary, not by always choosing contemplation over activity, but by always choosing to feed on the bread of life which is the Word of God revealed to us in Jesus.

And so we prepare to come to the Eucharist now, in the spirit of Mary, to feed on the bread of life to the eternal benefit of our bodies and souls.

Our secular world would do well to read Isaiah 55 in which God says, "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare."

In this moment, in this Cathedral, at this altar rail, the bread of life comes to us and meets with us.

Choose the better portion. It will not be taken away from you. And you will know what it is to have life in all its fullness. Amen.