

## THE SERMON for Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

Readings: Genesis 18: 1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1: 15-29; Luke 10: 38-42.

This morning, we have two very well-known stories in our Old Testament and Gospel readings. In our Pew Sheet, Alison has given us the lovely Rublev icon of the Trinity, perhaps my favourite icon.

On the surface, they are stories of two acts of hospitality: Abraham's welcome of the three men, widely regarded as angels – messengers from God – and the Gospel story of the hospitality of Martha and Mary in Bethany.

It is the Gospel that I wish to concentrate on this morning.

The story of Martha and Mary is so well known and so many interpretations have been placed on it that it is often difficult to know where to start with it.

Some argue that this is all about the relative value of worship versus service - that Mary choosing to sit at Jesus' feet was better than Martha's way of service. It is the debate between faith versus works; social activism versus piety. A debate which stretches as far as the value of the monastic life of learning and contemplation contrasted with the more secular looking life of those of us who live in the world. <sup>1</sup>

Perth Uniting Church theologian, Bill Loader writes:

This passage is wildly ambiguous. Is it giving Mary a male role and otherwise deprecating women's work, represented in Martha? Is it lauding Mary the submissive female and dismissing the caring Martha? Is it praising impracticality? Is it feminist in orientation, making space for Mary beyond women's traditional roles? Or is it the opposite? <sup>2</sup>

I know that I have used it as the two characteristics within my own spirituality, fighting for dominance and regularly say that I am Martha though I long to be Mary and if I don't have "Mary time" my spirit takes its revenge on the rest of me!

But let's go back to the story because for only four verses in Luke's gospel there is an awful lot said.

This is the only time we meet this family in Luke's gospel. The only other place they are mentioned is in John's gospel where we hear about their brother Lazarus, a great friend of Jesus', who dies and is raised back to life by Jesus; and then he calls into their home before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, where Mary anoints him.

Where is Lazarus in the Luke story? Is he away from home? Has he died? (There is one tradition which has Lazarus murdered after the story of Jesus raising him back to life based on John 12: 9-10 were the Jews plot to kill Jesus but because of the notoriety of Lazarus, he is included in the plot).

Whatever has happened to Lazarus, in this episode, it appears that Martha is the head of the household. It is she who invites Jesus to come to dinner. This is highly unusual and totally against Jewish custom for a woman to invite a man who is not closely related into her home. The fact that Jesus came with a band of merry men, is further scandal.

The shame of Martha's unmarried status, whether widowed or not, was great. Here she is adding further shame by inviting this rabbi and his disciples to dinner.

We always tend to look upon Mary as the younger sister, and perhaps she was. She was also unmarried, although if Martha is her older sister this wouldn't be so strange, rather unfortunate. But Mary is about to embark on some scandalous behaviour of her own! To sit in the same room with a group of men was very bad enough but to .... shock, horror ... listen to the teachings of a rabbi, oh my gosh! What was she thinking!

The issue was not housework versus study group. The issue actually pulled at the very fabric of society. You see, there were only a few things a woman could do that were worse than inviting a strange rabbi into her house, being taught by such a rabbi was one of them.

So, these women are both “storming the strongholds”, breaking the social and cultural rules of their day and yet in some ways you could say Jesus encourages them in their decisions, liberates them, if you like, from overbearing expectations.

I don't think this is a story about one way being better than another - service better than worship; action better than listening. I think it is more about being free to be who God calls you to be and being courageous in following through with it, and also about keeping your life in balance.

A few years ago, when I was doing the *Tree of Life* course, I heard this story preached from a very different point of view, or at least one which I hadn't heard before - the point of Martha's distractions! <sup>3</sup>

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things ...” [Luke 18: 41]

It has helped me to take another look at this passage and what it might really be about.

If your service leads you to resent the worship of others, if you become distracted about “many things”, that is when you might get a rebuke from Jesus and might need to reconsider what you are doing. It is those distractions which often crowd out the voice of God speaking to us - that busyness which helps us to avoid making time in our lives to stop and listen to what God might have to say to us, or just getting on with doing it!

I hope that the blokes in the congregation haven't switched off, thinking this is a story and a sermon just for the women, I'd like to end with a story which I hope will illustrate this point.

In a place where people used ice houses to preserve their food, these ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. "I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking." Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are still enough, and quiet enough, to hear. <sup>4</sup>

So this story of Martha and Mary brings us a some nuggets of truth.

Firstly we have to have the courage to be true to ourselves, even if that means bucking the traditions or conventions of our time, true to who God is calling us to be.

Second, we need to find a balance in our lives, whether God is calling to a life or action or one of listening. And as we focus, we need to have some space to stop and actually listen to what God is saying to us.

And thirdly, what is it that distracts us from the path we are called to tread? What is it that distracts us so that we lose the joy of serving, offering hospitality, and perhaps, entertaining the angels who may visit us?

May you be blessed by embracing the Martha and Mary within you, free from distractions and receive God's blessing. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley  
17<sup>th</sup> July, 2022

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

1. Marilyn MacDonald in her sermon *Follow your heart* posted on *midrash* July 12, 2010.
2. William Loader in *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary*.
3. Ven. Michael Pennington, in a sermon at *Tree of Life* probably in 2016.
4. shared by Beverly Snedeker, a story from James Hamilton from *Sermon Nuggets on The Text this week*.