21 July 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
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Many years ago, when in my early 20’s and a very new Christian we decided to hold a church fun day for children in our village one sunny July. We had organised games, craft activities, enacted bible stories and it was all held in our garden. We gathered a team of five helpers and we invited all the 4-10’s in the village. As they started flocking in we were crowded with children and parents. There was loads to do. We were trying to welcome them, register them, deal with the ones who were worried about leaving their parents, and prevent others from running off.

Or two of us were. The other three helpers had vanished. One of our team members had taken them off and they were sitting serenely in the sitting room leading a Bible Study! As you can imagine I wasn’t impressed and my frustration boiled over. Had the incarnate Lord been there at that moment I too would have said to him: ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me’. (Luke 10.40)

This story of the two sisters is almost as well known as the story of the Good Samaritan that we heard in our churches last week. Most women, when I mention this passage will tell me they relate to one or the other of the women. Martha, the one rushing around welcoming the guests to her home; often depicted in art as rather homely looking; in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid Tale the Martha’s are the domestic servants who do the drudgery jobs. Or Mary, the one sitting serenely at Jesus’ feet with the male disciples, listening to his words.

Most will relate to Martha. We recognise the frustration in her voice when she is hosting a gathering at her home and isn’t getting the help she needs. We’ve all been there. And many of us will feel rather sorry for her. Perhaps Jesus is a little unfair in his response to Martha: ‘there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part’. (Luke 10.42)
It seems as if Jesus is rebuking Martha for doing what was expected of her, which was to provide hospitality for her household and for her guests. We also think that at some stage Jesus and his guests will be hungry and that they will be thankful for Martha and her labours. The comment ‘the better part’ seems rather as if Jesus is creating a hierarchy where sitting and listening is ‘better’ than active service.

This has often been how we’ve read this passage. Where the contemplative life is seen as better than the activist life; where the call to a life of prayer as a monastic is seen as being more spiritual than the call to being a parent; where the homemaker is seen as less valuable than the academic; where women are to be seen and not heard, and are certainly not to complain. Is this what Jesus meant by this? I think not.

The word for the ‘many things’, or in other versions ‘many tasks’ that Martha is distracted by is ‘diakonia’: service. It is where we get the word ‘deacon’ from. It can mean all sorts of different aspects of ministry, from preparing food to looking after the poor. Elsewhere in Luke’s gospel those who provide service (diakonia) to Jesus are commended and Jesus describes himself as ‘one who serves’. And only last week we read of the Good Samaritan who was commended for his active service and the disciples surely had Jesus’ words ‘go and do likewise’ ringing in their ears as they went to Martha’s house. (Luke 10.37) So it can’t be right that Jesus is criticising Martha for also being one who serves. So what is he saying?

We are told in John’s Gospel that: ‘Jesus Loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus’. And in the context of love that he points out to her the truth: ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things,’ (Luke 10.41) Jesus is gently pointing out that her service, her ‘diakonia’, whatever that involved, was being done with distraction, worry and irritation. Her attention was on herself and Mary and not on those she was serving. Simone Weil, who was both political activist and contemplative, said that: ‘Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity’. Jesus was pointing out that what Mary was doing was, at that particular moment in time, exactly what Mary should have been doing. She was paying attention to Jesus.

Perhaps this passage isn’t about two opposing ways to live the faithful life with contemplation and action at loggerheads. This passage is about knowing when to choose to act and when to choose to sit and listen. And for both to be done with attention on Jesus. Perhaps Mary was providing hospitality to Jesus as well but her way of doing it, at that moment, was by paying attention to him, to what he was saying, to his teaching.
I remember going for tea with a friend once and she spent the entire time on the phone to her daughter and then I had to leave to pick up my child from school. I sat at her kitchen table, drank tea on my own and left. Paying attention to someone is an act of service, of generosity. It shows that they are of value to you.

In the OT reading from Genesis we get another glimpse of a situation where hospitality was needed and this time we see Abraham as the one rushing around. He runs to meet the guests, he runs to command Sarah to bake quickly, he runs to the herd. And here it is Sarah who stands at the entrance to the tent, listening while the three guests come with Angelic news that she would bear a son.

What Mary and Sarah were doing could be described as attentive hospitality. What might attentive hospitality look like in our own lives and in the lives of our churches? I wonder if we, like Martha and like Abraham, are so busy rushing around that we don’t pay attention to God in our midst.

In our second reading from Colossians we heard that Jesus is: ‘the ‘image of the invisible God… the firstborn of all creation… [the one who is] before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (Colossians 1.15) - This living God was in the room with Mary and Martha and Martha was too distracted with other stuff to focus on him.

Our Churches can be so frantic with events, programmes and ‘ministry’ that we can stop paying attention. To God. To each other. To those in need outside our communities. We can become so distracted, worried and irritated that we don’t give ourselves space and time to pray, to rest, to listen, to learn. Sometimes, if we’re honest, we rather like to stay frantically busy as we fear what might happen when we stop.

Martha was seen by Jesus in her distraction and lovingly given permission to sit with him for a while. Perhaps that’s what we are being invited to, in this time as we head into holiday season, as individuals and as a church.

What might it be like to give Jesus attentive hospitality? To give each other attentive hospitality. To put aside all our worries and distractions for a little while. To respond to the invitation: ‘there is need (right now) of only one thing’.

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