

Sermon 21 July 2019 – Luke 10: 38-42

May I speak in the name of Christ Jesus, Saviour and Redeemer.

Please do take a seat.

Hands up everyone who feels a bit sorry for Martha; who feels that in today's gospel reading she's a bit hard done by. Well I'm going to put mine up in the air. She has welcomed Jesus into her home, and is working hard, trying to do all the things that are necessary to extend hospitality to her honoured guest. She is rushed off her feet and needs some help, and gets told off for asking for it. It really does seem a bit unfair.

And even more so because this episode follows straight on in Luke's gospel from the parable of the Good Samaritan which we had last week. Jesus told that story in response to the question, 'And who is my neighbour?'; and isn't this exactly what Martha is trying to do, to be the very best of neighbours to Jesus by extending the very best of her hospitality to him. And she gets a kick-back.

For four weeks now our Sunday gospel readings have been following Luke's gospel straight through, but starting at a very significant place, Chapter 9 verse 51. 'As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem'. Everything in Luke's gospel up till then has been in a certain way a preamble. The story of Christ's foretelling, his birth, his baptism, his early ministry. However from this crucial point onward Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to his death. He is resolutely set upon his agonising death upon the cross. And we must read and interpret this second part of Luke's gospel, and today's reading, in the light of that knowledge.

We mustn't take this to mean that Jesus from then on was always actually physically travelling towards Jerusalem; that he was on a final short straight line journey towards that city. Rather that from then on all his actions, his teaching, his behaviour, his entire being was focussed towards his destiny in Jerusalem. Luke is giving us the story not of a physical journey but of a spiritual one. A journey that will mould and form his disciples, however imperfectly they understand or appreciate it, with the qualities and inner being that they will need to accompany him. And that same journey is one

that hopefully we participate in and undertake now; to be moulded and formed in the image of Christ, so that we, in Paul's phraseology, are worthy to die with Christ on His cross and to be reborn with Him, resurrected as children of God.

And at the heart and centre of this moulding, this reshaping, this reformation, is the answer the expert in the law gave last week when Jesus rebounded his own question back onto him 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus asks him what the law says, and being an expert on the law he knows the answer without Jesus having to tell him. Firstly 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind', - Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5 - and secondly, but only secondly, to 'Love your neighbour as yourself', - Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18.

And it seems to me that today's story of Martha and Mary is all about getting these two commandments, about loving God, and loving your neighbour, in the right order. It's not that Martha is doing something wrong, something bad, something sinful. She doing her best to follow Christ's second commandment, to be a good neighbour, to love Jesus as a neighbour. It's just that Mary has chosen the better part, the more important part, the thing that is firstly necessary, the first commandment, to love and listen to Jesus as her God.

I wonder if any of you, who are of a certain age as I am, remember sitting in services as a teenager, and being bored, perhaps during a sermon, and having nothing else at all to do but to flick through the old Book of Common Prayer, just because it was absolutely the only thing you had to hand. Seeking for some diversion, something, anything, to relieve the tedium you were feeling at that particular moment. And at the back, right at the back, apart that is from that astonishing list of who you weren't allowed to marry, were the 39 Articles of Religion, which to this day define the doctrine of this church, this Church of England. And if you feel you have the time and inclination they really are still worth puzzling over and wrestling with. And puzzling and wrestling are the right words, because very little that is vitally important, in faith as in life, is likely to be easy and simple.

It's Article 12, which has the really catchy title 'Of Good Works', that explains perhaps where Martha has gone slightly off-track; where perhaps

she might be putting the cart before the horse. It tells us that ‘Good Works’, that is all the good things, absolutely all the acts of love, of kindness, of mercy, of charity, of hospitality, of good that we do in this world are the fruits of our faith, of our love for our God; who we need first of all, before anything else, to love with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind. And not just that these Good Works can only follow on from our faith and love for our God, but in the exact words of the article that they ‘spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith’.

That all these Good Works, in other words our love for our neighbour, not only can only come into being if first we cleave wholeheartedly and with every fibre of our being to Christ our God; but also that if we genuinely and truthfully get this vital first part right, then we cannot help ourselves, but will inevitably and without separate effort do the Good Works of Christ’s second commandment. I see Christ’s words to Martha, that ‘you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing’, much, much less as a telling off, a reproof, a kick-back, a criticism, a reproach, but far, far more as an invitation. An invitation to join with Mary in partaking more fully of the greater of the two commandments.

So let us try to do what at times seems so very, very hard, with all the worries and distractions of this world that trouble us, and so troubled Martha, to keep all of our being firmly focussed on the first of Christ’s great commandments, to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; secure in the knowledge that if we do, as surely as night follows day that the second great commandment will be fulfilled in us, that we will inevitably live out that second commandment, to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. Not forcing oneself to do so, not feeling it to be an onerous duty, not worrying about whether we’re doing enough to earn God’s love, not being distracted from being in Christ’s presence and feeling his love surround and enfold us; but serving and loving our neighbour in joy and in love as a natural and inevitable consequence of loving our God, just as surely as night follows day.

Amen