

Year C Proper 11

Luke 10:38-42

Aren't these stories in Luke's Gospel a challenge? We should be feeling stretched as we read them again. Last week, we read the parable of the Good Samaritan and I encouraged you to reach beyond the surface; beyond the often recited moral lessons in the tale, to its central meaning. Whilst the parable does encourage us to show mercy and kindness to our neighbour, it further moves us to really live in the light of Christ. Here, in the story of Jesus' visit to Mary and

Martha, we face an even greater challenge in my opinion because I would like to suggest to you that the story is so often completely misunderstood. How often have you heard this story presented as a contrast between Martha; the doer, the activist, and Mary; the listener, the contemplative? Martha versus Mary and Jesus rather surprisingly judges that Mary is the winner. That kind of judgement always struck me as very unfair. The poor woman in the kitchen is labouring away for the sake of her guest and there's Mary opting out of her shared responsibility. Then she gets a verbal slap on the face from

her guest for doing the right thing. How unfair is that?

Something is not quite right here. In another part of Luke's writings, in Acts of the Apostles 6:1-6, we read the following:

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch,

a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”¹

Here the ministry of word and the ministry of table service are affirmed as equally necessary and important. Stephen, who has been assigned to table service, becomes ‘the word’ of the early church, as he boldly stands up for Christ and loses his life as a result. There is a complimentary appreciation of ministry in its varying forms here, not a declaration that one is superior to the other. So I think it would be very unlikely that the same author in the earlier

¹ NIV

story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha, would be making a contradictory point there. So I don't believe he was. This story is not about activist verses contemplative: it is not about word over service.

Instead there are two strands in this story that once identified offer a challenge to us. Early on in my theological training each of the students in my tutorial group were assigned a devotional book to read one term. And the books chosen were intended to stretch the students; to maybe even take them out of their comfort zones. And I was

asked to read a book called; “Revelations of Divine Love” written by someone called Julian of Norwich. I thought to myself; “never heard of him, but I’ll give it a go.” I realised early on that the book came from the fourteenth century and so I thought my tutor had assigned this to me because it was pre-Reformation and therefore solidly Catholic and that that in itself would be sufficiently challenging to the young Ulsterman raised in a Protestant culture. But, as it turned out, it wasn’t any kind of expected Roman theology which caused me difficulties but instead that Master Julian

seemed to show a decidedly feminine bias in his theology. He described Jesus as our mother; my goodness, surely not! And then it dawned on me as I read further that my assumption that Julian was male was nothing more than an assumption. The “Revelations of Divine Love” was in fact believed to be the first book written by a woman in the English Language. Now at that time I had watched the live television broadcast of the first female priests being ordained in the Church of England with disapproval. I thought that was a serious error; ordained ministry was male and I

thought Scripture emphatically endorsed that. And so when I was confronted with Julian of Norwich's book I recoiled from it. I was not going to be taught theology by a woman. How wrong I turned out to be. The conventions of first century Palestine would not permit an unmarried woman to be alone with a man without a good reason. There had to be a particular purpose for this scene to be acceptable. Notice that Luke told us that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what he was saying. The same phrase, 'sitting at the feet', is found in Acts 22 in reference to the apostle Paul learning from

his rabbi, Gamaliel. I wonder if Martha was not getting upset in the main because Mary was not doing her bit in the kitchen but instead because Mary was behaving as if she were a man. She was assuming the posture of the eager student, hanging on every word from the teacher, not because she was captivated by his presence but because she needed to learn from him. Like the apostle Paul, she was preparing herself for a ministry to come. She was listening to the rabbi because the day was coming when she would be a rabbi herself. None of this should sound particularly alarming to us if

we take seriously the apostle Paul's statement in his letter to the Galatians, "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."² Here in Luke's Gospel, we have the outworking in practice of what that statement means. So, here is an example in the ministry of Jesus of the gender inclusive nature of the ministry of word.

So that's the first strand in the story. The second strand emerges from the conduct of Martha. On the surface Martha appeared to

² Galatians 3:28 NRSV

be in the right. A guest had arrived at their home and both women had a responsibility to be in the kitchen. This was the traditional and established calling of the women. The comfort of the guest was paramount and here was Mary falling down in that respect. But notice what Martha did when she complained. Firstly, she risked embarrassing her guest by rudely appealing to him over her sister. Instead of addressing her complaint to her sister she spoke directly to Jesus, her guest, as if it were his misdemeanour and not Mary's. "Don't *you* care?", she moaned. And then secondly as

she looked at her sister, “don’t you care that my sister has left me *by myself* to do the serving?” Jesus responded; “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” His concern was not with busy Martha, but with worried and distracted Martha.³ Martha, who had taken her eyes off the one she called ‘Lord’ could not lift her gaze from her own service. She had become obsessed by what she was doing and what her sister was not doing, instead of delighting in the one she was serving.

³ Feasting on the Word Bartlett & Taylor eds. 2010 pg. 265

So there are two particular discipleship issues that have emerged from this story and that need to be applied in our day too. No Christian should ever be restricted in her Christian service because she is a woman. The Church of Scotland has effectively addressed this issue in its recent history through the appointment of women elders and ministers and through the appointment of three female Moderators of the General Assembly so far. However in the wider church there is still discrimination and we owe it to our Lord to stand up against it and to promote the service of all, regardless of

gender. Also, it is critical in any act of service to ensure that our attention does not stray from the one being served to ourselves. The moment we become self-conscious and allow that self-consciousness to go unchallenged we make an idol of our service and fail to worship Christ. It is important every day to remind ourselves of who we are and whom we serve in case we forget. If we continue to remember that Jesus is Lord and act accordingly then we will find freedom to serve.