

## Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

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May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

Last week our gospel was the parable of the Good Samaritan, and we saw active ministering to be the key. Tim, the Precentor, wisely entreated us to ‘*Go and do likewise*’ as we show active mercy. Yet here, just a few verses later, there is a possible counter balance. Here there is a concern not to dive into activity, to allow ourselves to be consumed by the needs of others. So what’s going on?

The story has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Some feminist readings have openly criticized it as revealing a patriarchal and androcentric attitude of the writer, Luke. To get involved in such discussion is, however, to be seduced by what medieval Jewish writers called in Hebrew *Pilpul* – or *Bilbul* – difficult to translate into English (so check it out with Megan over coffee), but the essential meaning being that we lose sight of the wood for the trees. So, I want to suggest we can look more broadly and find some liberating pointers that free rather than constrain.

We see a household of two sisters – probably siblings, but certainly ministerial colleagues in a space where Jesus gathers to share a meal.

Interestingly the title ‘Lord’ is used 3 times in the passage. And this was a post-resurrection title, so points us to an ongoing event in the life of the early Church. For some writers they point us to the imagery being resonant of eucharistic liturgy, and the presence of women at the heart of this, in positions of leadership.

In this domestic dispute from our Gospel, we have Martha complain she’s being left to do all the work (ever done that in your life? I seem to recall similar conversations with my sister many years ago!). And Jesus’ response? Mary has chosen the *‘better part which will not be **taken away** from her’*.

Surely this is a reference to Genesis 27, where one of the original stories of sibling rivalry of Jacob and Esau occurs and in 27.35 we hear Isaac, the father, say to his son Esau of Jacob, *‘Your brother came deceitfully, and he has **taken away** your blessing.’*<sup>1</sup> This story is picked up in Hebrews 12.15-17 where it shows Esau’s as a model where worldly concerns have replaced the true heart. As it says in Hebrews 12.15, *‘See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble’*.

So Mary will not have the better part **taken away**. What is this better part? So often this is seen as a battle

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<sup>1</sup> In the Septuagint the word ἔλαβεν is used in Genesis 27.35, from λαμβάνω, meaning ‘he took’. In Luke the wording is οὐκ ἀφαιρεθήσεται, from ἀφαιρέω, meaning ‘to take away’.

between contemplation and activity. The Church Fathers often saw it as such, for example S Augustine sees Martha as representing the temporal, active life and Mary the eternal, contemplative life.

However, if we look more closely to the text we see that rather than a concern about domestic task, the focus is actually upon ministry. Where we often read '*Martha was distracted by her **many tasks***', a more accurate rendition would be '*Martha was drawn around by many **ministries***'. And Martha's question, '*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?*' is more accurately translated, '*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me alone **to minister?***'

The passage's focus is properly on ministerial activity within the Christian community, not who's turn it is to load the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the dishwasher!

So just further on in the passage what we see is '*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled by many [forms of service or ministry]; there is need of only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*'

In other words, the essential ministerial focus – the better part - of any Christian community is to sit at the feet of Jesus and focus on Jesus. Mary sits at Jesus' feet – the place of the disciple (and note the radical way in which Luke emphasizes that women are equally valid in that space).

To understand this, we also have to look to the Gospel of John to see the story in it's wholeness, as in John's Gospel we find the story of Jesus going later on to Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus had died. We are told that Martha goes to Jesus, '*while Mary stayed at home*' I wonder if any of you remember what happens next? Jesus comes to them and then:

*'When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she **kneled at Jesus' feet** and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'*' Mary has continued to understand the need to be at the feet of Jesus.

As we digest this, let's look again at the Good Samaritan and today's story of Mary and Martha. Maybe our readings over the 2 weeks don't contradict one another. Maybe, rather, we are reminded that the gospel is quite clear: to be Good Neighbours, we have to first learn to sit at the feet of Jesus. We have to learn to love the Lord our God, before we can love our neighbour. The essential ministerial focus of any Christian community is to sit at the feet of Jesus and focus on Jesus.

Nicholas de Cusa (1401–1464) was a German philosopher, theologian, mathematician, and cardinal. One of his most influential philosophical concepts is '*the coincidence of opposites*', a central idea in his mystical and metaphysical thought<sup>2</sup>. He argues that:

- Human knowledge is limited and ultimately ignorant in comparison to the infinite truth of God.

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<sup>2</sup> See his 1440 treatise *On Learned Ignorance*

- Because God is infinite, human reason, which works through distinctions and opposites, cannot fully comprehend God.
- So, in God, opposites coincide beyond the capacity of reason to divide them. An example of this is the Circle and Line: de Cusa imagined a circle of infinite radius—it becomes indistinguishable from a straight line. So, curved and straight coincide at infinity. And so argues, contradictions are united within God.

As we grasp at the way that our infinite God is able to draw together even the coincidence of opposites, perhaps the suggested dichotomy of active and contemplative is shown as false within the immensity of God.

Instead of being caught up with ‘*am I this, or am I more that*’? Perhaps there is a simpler question for today: how do you make space to sit at the feet of Jesus in your life? If you don’t then are you prepared to do something about this?

Friends, I urge you, don’t worry about the dishwasher, or the housework – that isn’t what this reading is about. Don’t be pulled away by many things. Don’t let yourself become anxious. Instead I invite you to come back next week and hear Jesus teach us his one and only prayer and I’ll be preaching on how we are to be *utterly changed into fire*. So as we journey this week, let’s focus on the heart of our ministry together: let’s sit at the feet of Jesus. Amen.

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