

Today I want to particularly focus on the Gospel passage.

Although it may be short and sharp there is a lot to it.

I found this out when I came to prepare this sermon, and consequently started reading through some commentaries about this passage.

It seems to be that every generation has tried to fit this little story of Mary and Martha to its need, and to find in it a meaning suited to the Christian life of its time.

As I delved into the commentaries I found myself getting caught up in a lively debate that has been going on throughout Christian history. I got enticed into a discussion about *doing* and *being*, or the spiritual life and the active life and which sister portrayed a better model.

Was it Mary who some scholars and theologians believe was the contemplative one of the two, and the one who portrayed the contemplative way of life as a higher virtue.

Or was it Martha, who was the active one and who portrayed her acts of service as a higher virtue.

Then after further research I found that there was the debate about this Gospel passage being a story that affirms the place and role of women in the church, as against a story that discourages women from exercising leadership roles in the church.

This was based on how one viewed Mary. Were women to adopt the passive silent role of Mary in this scene, or the fact that by sitting at Jesus' feet Mary had taken the posture of a disciple. For in the culture of the day only men were allowed to sit at the feet of their teacher.

Despite these perceptions, the fact remains that Mary and Martha each responded differently and individually to Jesus.

And I believe that in this difference there is a deeper meaning there that is very relevant to all of us. Don't get me wrong I'm not dismissing the debates that have gone on about this passage.

But I think at the heart of this Gospel is the question, are we to busy doing things FOR Jesus that we are not spending time WITH Jesus?

Here we have Jesus who has been welcomed into Martha's and Mary's home, and Martha's first impulse was to get something going in the kitchen. In doing this she was being faithful to the tradition of hospitality that had begun when Abraham welcomed three guests to his tent in Gen 18.

And perhaps just as Abraham assisted Sarah in the duties of hospitality, Martha expected Mary to do the same.

However, as Martha was flipping through the cook books, boiling the water, chopping up the vegetables and setting the table. Mary settled down at the feet of their friend and guest, attentive to what he was saying.

Who could blame Martha for banging a few pots and putting the plates on the table with a sturdy thump?

But in reality Martha had lost her focus on what she knew in her heart. She was worried and distracted by many things, and

had lost sight of the one she significantly called “Lord”. Jesus is gently calling her to refocus.

It is this refocusing that I believe Jesus is bringing to our attention in this passage. Jesus is inviting us to live in and be present to the present moment in Him.

He is asking us, are we on auto pilot like Martha? Is our desire to serve Jesus, to do things for Jesus, and in so doing neglect our guest, the Lord himself.

Are we too often listening to ourselves and what we want to do and neglecting the one thing that is needed, to listen to the Lord’s word. To be present to him.

But how do we come to sit at Jesus’ feet? How do we listen to Jesus?

I believe we need to consciously come into a place of being present to the Lord. And it is through prayer and word that this can happen. For when we pray we enter into conversation with

God and into a place that offers deep inner work of spiritual transformation.

Prayer is not simply what we do. It is a way of being. It is the answer to our heart's deepest longings, it is resting in the reality of our being that is, God's love. Prayer allows us the space to come into and be present to Jesus, and it is at the heart of our relationship with God.

But we also need to be able to listen to God when we enter this space of being present to God in prayer.

I think Mother Teresa says it best

“If we really want to pray we must first learn to listen, for in the silence of the heart God speaks.”

All the great spiritual writers speak of the importance of silence in prayer. But, for many of us we are frightened of silence, we think it will swallow us up, and we try to fill every moment with noise and activity.

However, silence in prayer is the centre of prayer. It is in the silence that God can speak to us. He can stir us to receive his word afresh and let his love form within us.

Silence is the precious oasis of stillness where we can come and sit at Jesus' feet and listen to his word.

I believe that the parish of Grovely does this. We as a parish live this message that is at the heart of today's Gospel. It is evident in the fact that as a parish we meet every fortnight to come and be present to Christ, to listen, and pray for the parish.

As a student each semester I have to come up with learning goals. I want to share with you what my number one goal has been while I have been in this parish.

I hope to grow in a deeper trust for God, and to grow in the discipline and importance of setting aside regular time and moments of reflection to grow deeper in my prayerful relationship with God. The purpose being that I will come into and grow in my true identity, my true self that is in God. I believe that to know self and to know God are so closely related that heart felt knowledge of one without the other, does not give us the wholeness that we are called into through Christ.

I hope to be able to challenge within myself and in the busyness of life the importance of setting 10, 20, 30 min of time to God morning and night and being able to enter into Gods presents at that dedicated time or just being present to God. Even if I'm not in the right place spiritually, physically or mentally.

Not only has Rev'd Jenny helped me to come into this goal and make it part of my being - But you as a parish have helped me.

You all have shown me the importance of prayer and being present to the Lord amongst the desire to serve Christ.

Can I encourage us all as a parish, as we continue to serve and do things for Jesus and the Kingdom of God, that we keep spending time with Jesus at his feet and listening to his word in prayer.

Let us pray

Eternal God

you draw near to us in Christ

and make yourself our guest:

amid the cares of our daily lives,

make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence,

that we may treasure your word above all else.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,

who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.