

Over the past weeks we have been travelling through the gospel of Luke and in particular the stories relating to the nature of Christian mission.

In recent weeks we have heard that the characteristics of mission are loyalty, commitment, faithfulness, compassion and trust through love. Luke reminds us that in the security of God's personal love for each one of us, we are enabled to live a life that goes beyond self-indulgence to one in which we are enabled to look beyond ourselves to our brothers and sisters and genuinely care for them through mission.

So far in this section of Luke's gospel we have heard that Jesus appointed a group of 70 and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. What this may well imply is that Jesus trusts us to depend upon his teachings in all we do in our daily life. Then last week we heard the parable of the good Samaritan which challenges us to show merciful love to someone we know is in need – and also to receive help - perhaps even from someone we least expect.

Today we come to the story of Mary and Martha - a story that brings Jesus as the Logos, the Word made flesh into focus and highlights that listening to the Word is the one thing that undergirds all following of Jesus; the story also highlights that discipleship is universal.

Now this story is found only in Luke's gospel, and perhaps one feature is that it draws from many of us a tendency to take sides in support of either Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus or Martha who wants help to look after the practicalities of hospitality.

So let's look at both women beginning with Martha.

Martha, according to the gospel of John, was the beloved disciple of Jesus and as such she became the spokeswoman for the messianic faith of the early church community. Her confession in John's gospel that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God, the one coming into the world, parallels that of Peter's at Caesarea Philippi. In the narrative of John chap 11, it is Mary who plays a subordinate role to Martha, and it is Martha who is characterized as fulfilling both the ministry of the word and of the table.

With this in mind we are better placed to read more positively the construction of the Lukan text in which it seems that one sister is pitted against the other. Such a competitive perspective however has dualistic connotations that do not fit with the way of Jesus or the nature of his mission.

The structure of his mission does not have borders, but rather each practice, while retaining individual integrity, integrates into the other making a wholeness, a oneness in the nature of

mission. Both sisters in today's gospel passage are two female characters who are historical and independent apostolic figures in their own right.

The story, on one level at least, is about the way Jesus teaches us about the universalism through his unifying oneness in which all are not the same, yet all are one in our love and communion with God in him.

In the story of Mary and Martha and Jesus engagement with them, Jesus crosses both social and religious borders. In the cultural norms, women were to serve only relatives, yet Jesus allows Martha to serve him. In the cultural norms of the day, women were to not to host groups of people assembled in their homes. In terms of household apostolic gatherings, women, and in this story Martha and Mary, host the group in their home. In the cultural norms of the day, a woman's role was one of service, rather than that of a student, yet Jesus teaches the women and Mary sits at his feet which is the posture of the disciple.

Intellectual initiative on the part of women was not encouraged in Rabbinic Judaism. While study of the Torah was one of man's highest priorities, it was not considered appropriate for a woman to do the same. As the gospel story unfolds, Martha asks Jesus to support her by telling Mary to help serve - Jesus responds by telling Martha that she is worried and distracted by many things: there is need of only one thing and that is, to **not** get caught up in things that take her away from listening and reflecting on his word.

Theologian Robert Karris suggests that the lesson here is not that one should prepare a casserole rather than a seven course meal - but that one thing undergirds all following of Jesus: listening to his word – for listening to his word speaks about our trust in him and desire for him.¹ It is the better part that will not be taken away from us – for it is from this immovable foundation that all service will flow.

In the first reading from Amos we hear the importance of the word of the Lord – for when it is withheld, as it was in this prophecy - the people wander aimlessly from pillar to post trying to find it - but in vain. In Christ, the Word, however - it is always readily available to us.

In the epistle we hear about the power of the Word in the supremacy of Christ over the cosmos and the church. It has long been recognized that this passage is from a primitive Christian hymn:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, all things have been created through him and for him. He is the head of the body, the church: he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased

¹Robert J. Karris O.F.M. “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Geoffrey Chapman: London. 1993. p702

to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

I believe the challenge the gospel story brings before us today, in the very busy era in which we live, is to reflect on how we live in Christ each day - do we ever have time to sit at his feet contemplating his word, do we allow him to feed us in this way ?

Now we may take some time today to respond to that challenge and in our reflection, we can hold in our hearts that Jesus as the logos, the Word, reveals a God who gives, evokes joy and wonder -and such a God in giving these things transforms us, for his approach creates new possibilities. This is the wonder of our Trinitarian God – evolving, re-creating, making new.

My prayer for us all, is that we may come to know and accept a more contemplative life that offers to infill our yearnings in the deep caverns of our soul.

Let us pray together.

Dear Lord,

Help us to listen -help us to open our hearts and minds to your Word in our lives, so that in quietness and trust we shall meet our strength as your disciples. Amen

The Lord be with you.