



17th July 2022
Genesis 18.1-10a
Luke 10.38-42

Losing our Centre

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

I wonder if your experience is like mine in that family gatherings are anything but spontaneous and usually demand months of planning. First we have to decide upon a date. I've already come to the conclusion that if there are diaries in heaven I'll book a ticket to the other place. I suspect Paul and Carolynn have had quite a time of it making all the plans necessary for Joshua's Blessing today!

The Middle Eastern tradition can be more flexible. An open table with the expectation that guests can just casually drop by. That's certainly the impression given by our first reading of Abraham entertaining three strangers who were just happening to pass by.

So, today's lectionary passage is the story of Jesus unexpectedly turning up in Bethany and receiving the generous, impromptu hospitality of Martha and Mary. None of this seemed to be planned – yet in typical Middle Eastern style Jesus and his disciples are welcomed into this home as honoured guests.

In that Mediterranean world the Greeks made Zeus, their most important God, the one who also looked after hospitality. They thought it was that important.

Today's is a much loved passage – as, I think, are all the gospel stories based in Bethany – this village on the outskirts of Jerusalem became a sort of second home for Jesus with Mary, Martha and Lazarus becoming something of an extended family to him.

Perhaps this story is also included because in Luke's day Christians never worshipped in buildings like this one but actually in each others' homes. And in this house-church context perhaps there would have been a natural split between those who just turned up and enjoyed the worship and those who prepared the house or courtyard for this fellowship time together. It begs the question: when did rotas become essential in church life!!

So why, if this sort of work preparation work is honourable - the kind undertaken

by Martha – is she taken to one side by Jesus?

Back last century I remember whilst in my first pastorate in Kettering as an Assistant Minister my colleague and I devised a Lent sermon series entitled: Last Journey to Jerusalem – each week we stopped off with Jesus as he passed through places like Jericho and met the likes of Zacchaeus the tax collector – towards the end we'd got as far south as Bethany and so had a sermon on this passage entitling it: Sisters in the kitchen – but looking back that was a complete misnomer because actually only one of them had their hands in the sink!

So what's the point and purpose of today's narrative? Some commentators scratch their heads and conclude that, in a way, it is widely ambiguous. Is it, for example allocating to Mary a male role of sitting at the feet of a rabbi whilst Martha gets on with the culturally expected female work of preparing a meal? Might it be presenting Mary as a submissive female or could it be the exact opposite by letting her break through the traditions of her day and take on the established role and posture of a male disciple? Or is this in fact a passage advocating pious impracticality – if so, is it any wonder that subsequently some of us have been criticised for being so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use!

It has, of course, most often been interpreted as Jesus praising reflection and devotion on the one hand whilst warning – even chastising Martha on the other for too much activity and fussing.

Well, like many gospel narratives there is probably no one correct interpretation. Today I simply want to suggest that the themes of jealousy and distraction are never far away from all that happened that night in Bethany when Jesus unexpectedly turns up for supper.

The M and M sisters come over as different personality types and in this instance was Martha just a bit jealous of Mary. Jealous of the one who effortlessly seems to win the approval of Jesus by doing nothing other than listening – whilst she, Martha rushes around trying her best only to be criticised?

Sibling rivalry is regularly to be found in the bible. There's Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers and of course Cain and Abel.

Jealousy is so often a pointless and somewhat exhausting state of mind. Very little is achieved by wishing you were someone else or wanting what is clearly not coming your way.

The alternative is to value the person you are and the opportunities that do exist around you.

Sibling comparisons can become toxic. Parents can compound the tension by favouring one child over another.

Well in Bethany that evening perhaps we just get a hint that Martha might have been jealous of her sister's easy-going nature. Mary just doesn't seem to have the Protestant Work Ethic that was so clearly a feature of Martha's life – but worse than that it now seems it's Mary's perspective on life rather than Martha's that is being commended by Jesus.

So, where is Martha's focus? Is it on serving Jesus? Is it on hosting in a gracious way? Perhaps, without knowing it what has really crept up on her is an unhealthy focus on her sister. She has made Mary the centre of her attention and all that she thinks she isn't doing – just sitting at Jesus' feet. Is that Martha's mistake?

I suspect the pro-activists amongst us consider it to be a rather understandable fault. So in this story amid her many tasks and her keenness to get everything just right the moment just consumes her, so much so that she tragically misses the value of the real beauty of what was going on around her – fellowship and encounter.

Here's how one commentator describes her dilemma: *Overwhelmed and fragmented by the demands she is placing on herself she appears to have lost her centre.*

'Losing our centre' – isn't that a great phrase – and doesn't it describe us all at times.

This mindset – one that men can have just as much as women – means that the emphasis put on the practical arrangements began to subvert the purpose of the visit.

This way of thinking can show itself in our lives too. We in the church can become so obsessed with our buildings that we forget the mission to which they need to be put. It can even become a form of legalism so that we find ourselves obsessed with rules and procedures so much so that we take our eye of the purpose and goal behind them.

That said, I'm not at all sure that we read this passage accurately if we come away with the impression that Jesus was just angry with Martha. I think he was concerned – and he stops her in that frenzied bubble of activity in which she lived – he cuts through to her as he speaks her name not once but twice: *Martha, Martha*. If it is a rebuke I suspect it was a loving one – in fact full of appreciation for what she was so desperately trying to do yet failing to achieve.

Maybe as a result of reading today's narrative we might all think again about the

motives behind our busy-ness. Do we ever take our eyes off the ball and actually forget the reason we are on that rota, the purpose behind a church service or the value of a human encounter? When we are distracted by the processes and procedures around us we can all too quickly lose the essence of what we are meant to be about.

I was once at a conference and the session was all about the way rotas and busyness can become all consuming in church life, so much so that we can turn up at a service not with the aim of worshipping God but needing to see, say three people on my list to talk about next week's tea, notice sheet or working party. And ministers can be as guilty of this as anyone. Indeed, one person, a treasurer, told the story of going up to receive communion not only to be given a wafer, but then a small piece of paper stuff into his breast pocket by the priest which was actually an invoice. To do that at the communion rail?

Maybe Jesus, in today's narrative, simply wanted Martha to refocus on what was really important at that moment – and that was encounter and fellowship.

Prayer and worship can slow us down and offer us a better rhythm to take us purposefully through a new week.

Bible study can refocus our minds on what really matters and lift us from a hollow functionalism.

Consciously seeking God's presence in the mundane can give us a new sense of purpose in our routines.

Jesus wanted Martha to see it differently – just as I believe he wants us to value the companionship of a meal table above the culinary correctness of each course. He wants her 'to be' as well as 'to do' – to love the Martha she is deep down rather than have to be the busy, reliable, dependable and always first in the queue Martha she's exhaustedly tried being for so long.

So, I suspect the point of today's story is that any Christian service can come adrift, lose focus and even become meaningless if it isn't backed up with a prayerful openness which listens out for God's presence – for without that openness to God we too can so often find ourselves distracted 'busy doing nothing', yet with such openness our service to God and each other can have real depth, meaning and purpose.

May it be so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen...