16 ORDINARY SUNDAY ST MARGARETS ELTHAM

Mary and Martha

A collaboration between Rev Robert Street and Rev Linda Fiske

Luke 10 .38-42

Mary and Martha – such a simple story, such a minefield. Who would have thought?

It’s probably even more tricky when it’s a man commenting on a story about two women.

So, from the outset let me say that whatever this story is saying it is not directed just at women. It is directed at followers of Jesus of whatever gender. For all of us.

Too often this story has been understood to be contrasting two ways of being- and commending one as superior over the other – Mary has chosen the better part.

And I have to say I think you could be forgiven for thinking that Martha gets a pretty raw deal here. Martha is concerned about offering hospitality-a hugely important aspect of middle eastern life. I’m sure many of you can relate to Martha’s frustration with Mary, and her irritation with Jesus. It doesn’t take much imagination to put yourself in Martha’s place – especially as a woman- because two thousand years later who still shoulders the bulk of the work of hospitality?

You can hear Martha’s irritation. Jesus, I’m sure its lovely for Mary to sit at your feet drinking in every word, but can’t you see I’m run ragged here out in the kitchen. Don’t you care!! And perhaps muttering under her breath, typical man!

And there you have it – spiritual versus practical. Higher calling valued over the mundane activities. This is not only a tension experienced by women. The same sorts of characterisations can be made about men. This place would fall down around our ears if it wasn’t for me willing to get my hands dirty while you spend all your days with your holy books!

Robert asks; so is Jesus’ being insensitive and insulting to all the doers in the world? Is he giving permission to all those who find labouring with their hands not to their taste, permission to sit around being spiritual?

Robert answers his question. I don’t believe that Jesus is advocating one or the other. We are called by Jesus to serve the poor, to heal the sick, to visit those in prison. We are called to be active in seeking justice for the vulnerable.

There will be a time when Mary will be called by Jesus to be active in serving him and loving her neighbours. But this moment is her time for giving all her attention to his teaching. Clearly this irritated Martha. But you could say that Martha is being challenged to see that maybe her worry and anxiety for doing things as they ought to be done, is getting in the way of the need for her to take time, to stop for a while and be refreshed by spending time in the presence of Jesus. Especially as Jesus seems to be saying actually Martha, I don’t really need all this. You are making it more burdensome than you need to. keep it simple and join us together with Mary.

My understanding is that the one thing needful for Mary Martha and us, is to take time to replenish our spirit otherwise we will run out of energy and capacity. This threat applies to the life of Christian service; of discipleship. We can be so busy getting on with what needs to be done, that we don’t notice the signs that we are running low on spiritual energy.

To use a biblical image – we could say the well is running dry. And if we don’t do something about it, we will have no capacity to serve others. The modern term is burn out. And it is not uncommon in the life both in church and outside of it. Could it be that the gift the Christian community for our neighbours is to create a place of quiet sanctuary? A place to spend time in the presence of Jesus and one another. There are many forms this could take. The Labyrinth and Yarning Circle are examples as well as times for meditation. For most of us, this eucharist of a Sunday has been the primary place where we come to the well. This is where we are refreshed for the life of doing.

What is the **one thing necessary** that Jesus is talking about?

It can be hard for the doers among us to hear an answer to this question because we can be so distracted by all these things that we need to do! We can miss out on what’s truly important and that is to allow ourselves to be deeply moved by Jesus’ teaching. In other words, we need to let something happen in us and to us. We have to be to be willing to **be** rather than **do**. The needful thing is to be open and receptive to Jesus’ love and teaching. At its essence, Jesus’ message was to rest in his Father’s love. To trust him. This is what Jesus did even to the point of his horrific death on the cross and his plaintive cry for forgiveness for those who did not understand their own actions. Jesus trusted that what needed to be accomplished would be accomplished.

If we bring the Martha and Mary story into our contemporary context, we face the issue of who will do the work that needs to be done in our church when there are so few to step up? Focus on this question can make us anxious and stressed. Some of us grieve the loss of our active roles. Especially when we can’t do what we once did, so we might echo Maratha’s irritation. Who will help?

Herein lies the trap for doers! We assume that it is up to us to organise and create! In fact, it is the Spirit that equips and guides. It is right for each of us as we grow in wisdom and experience to realise that God will provide new opportunities for each of us to choose the better part that will not be taken from us. May we be inspired to reach towards new ways of being that nurture us so we may offer true hospitality to others.

AMEN