

Listening to Jesus

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Tony Lemon on Sunday 17 July, 10.0am and 12 noon, at St Peter's Wolvercote. Ref: Luke 10, 42 'Mary has taken the better part'

There are a number of familiar places in the Gospels where Jesus says things that we find hard to accept at face value – things which seem unfair or counter-intuitive. One is his saying 'to them that hath shall be given'. Another is his seeming disregard for family ties and responsibilities when calling his disciples to follow him. Today's short Gospel reading, about Martha and Mary, is another, when Jesus appears to devalue the practical Martha and the hospitality she is anxious to provide, preferring her sister's more contemplative stance as she sits at his feet and seeks to listen to Jesus. Our natural inclination is to feel sympathy for Martha, and sorry that she is doing all the work yet is implicitly reprimanded. In all three instances the problem is probably intensified by issues of language and by cultural differences. It was normal to speak with strong, to our eyes overstated, simplicity, rather than to express views in more nuanced terms. This is emphasised by the lack of comparatives in classical Greek – words like better or worse. Modern translations of this passage have tried to soften Jesus' response by translating his words as 'Mary has taken the better part', but the Greek literally means 'the good part': it would be wrong to read into this that Martha's part is bad, but Jesus' rebuke to Martha still leaves us with a sense of unfairness.

First of all, there is the obvious contrast in temperament between Mary and Martha. They have often been seen as models of the active and contemplative models of spirituality. Both action and contemplation are important – the practicalities of food, clothes and shelter demand action, but a meaningful existence demands far more than these necessities, making time for thought and reflection essential. This is a balance which we all strike differently, reflecting our temperament and inclinations. Some people are naturally active and practical, while others are more inclined to reading and quiet contemplation. It is easy for people with such contrasting temperaments to clash, as Martha and Mary clearly did – almost certainly not for the first time, because Martha's irritation with her sister, so great that she asks Jesus to rebuke her, appears to arise from her experience of living with her.

William Barclay makes one comment here which had particular resonance for me: '*We have never allowed enough for the place of temperament in religion.*' In a dozen words he has, I think, got to the heart of one critical element of what separates different Anglican traditions – evangelical, liberal, Catholic – and indeed different Christian traditions. In part, of course, we like what we are used to. But what we prefer, where we feel at home, is also very much a matter of temperament. The liberal Catholic tradition which we affirm at St. Peter's is one where tradition and reverence in worship combine with a desire to be intellectually and spiritually challenged, recognising that we all have doubts and difficulties in our quest for faith and looking to explore our questions together.

Secondly, and returning to Martha and Mary, why did Jesus take Mary's part so strongly? It is perhaps relevant here to remember the stage of Jesus' journey when this incident must have occurred. Although it is placed at a point in Luke's Gospel where Jesus final journey to Jerusalem had barely begun, this is geographically impossible: Mary and Martha belong in Bethany, less than half an hour's walk from Jerusalem. Geography and chronology are clearly not Luke's main concern, and he may have placed this incident here because it concerns hospitality: coming after Jesus' blessing and instruction to the disciples, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, concerning practical hospitality towards our neighbours of all nationalities, today's Gospel concerns hospitality towards those who bring God's message.

If we view the passage from this perspective, Mary's behaviour and Jesus' commendation of it begin to make sense. Jesus was on the final stage of his journey to Jerusalem, and to the Cross, knowing full well what lay ahead. His whole being was taken up with the intense struggle to accept this. When he came to the home of Martha and Mary what he wanted was a period of quiet, an oasis of calm where he could turn away briefly from the demanding crowds. That is what Mary gave him as she sat and listened. Martha of course loved him too, and was trying to be kind in the only way she knew: to celebrate his coming into their home by laying on the best that the house could provide. But for Jesus at that moment it was *the wrong kind of kindness*.

There is an important lesson here: very often we want to be kind to people, but – without really thinking about it – we want to be kind to them *in our way*. If that way is not what is needed, it is very easy to take offence and think that we are not appreciated. Martha clearly symbolises the person with an active temperament who must be doing something, who needs to fill every moment, and it is in character that such people complain about lack of help. To help someone, we need to try and understand their feelings, and to be sensitive to what they really need, even if it is not the kind of help that we should instinctively offer.

Thirdly, we need to reflect on what Mary was actually doing. She was *listening to Jesus* and taking note of his teaching. When Jesus says that only one thing is necessary, this is probably what he means – the absolute necessity of listening to and obeying the call of Christ. That call is a radical one, one which challenges the assertion of self-sufficiency that characterises the outlook of many who are not receptive to his call – a state of mind which is very widespread in our relatively affluent society where it is easy for people to feel in control of their lives and with no need of spiritual support, at least until something fundamental goes wrong. Only when we recognise our need can we begin to approach true faith.

In this very act of listening to Jesus, Mary was behaving unconventionally in terms of the prevailing culture. Houses in first-century Palestine, as in many parts of the world to this day, were divided into male and female spaces. The public room was where the men would meet. The kitchen, and other quarters unseen by outsiders, belonged to the women. For Mary to settle down comfortably and listen to Jesus was to cross an invisible but important boundary. This in itself may have been the primary cause of Martha's irritation, or at least aggravated it. But this was clearly acceptable to Jesus. He had re-drawn ethnic boundaries in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and now he is re-drawing traditional cultural boundaries between men and women within Israel.

Jesus invariably sought to stress one message in each of his parables, and it may well be that a sermon should endeavour to do the same. I'm conscious that in this sermon I have offered three or four rather disconnected thoughts, so perhaps I may conclude by summarising them. First, we have recognised the importance of temperament in religion, and the need for tolerance of the variety of spiritual expression that results from it. Secondly, the examples of Mary and Martha highlight the need to be sensitive to the needs people have when we seek to be kind towards them. Thirdly, we see in Jesus' approbation of Mary's actions another example of his breaking down boundaries, this time those between men and women. Last but certainly not least, we see the critical importance of listening to Jesus' teaching if we are to recognise our spiritual needs.