

Pentecost 6  
17/7/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 1:15-23  
Psalm 15  
Luke 10:38-42

The one thing needful

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*In a sentence:*

*The one thing we need to “do” is trust that, in Christ, we are already “right before God”, and then to live as in the world as if this were the case.*

The ancient versions of our biblical text sometimes show great variation at particular points in the text. One reason for this is that what was probably the original text was just too hard for the old copyists to believe that it was correct. The text offended the copyists, so they changed it to make it more palatable or sensible. When it looks like this might have happened, modern biblical critics ask, What is the *most challenging* version of these variations – the hardest to swallow. This reflects the assumption that a copyist was more likely to change a passage to make it easier than to make it harder.

Our gospel reading today is one of these disputed texts. The difficult thing is the thoroughgoing unreasonableness of Jesus’ response to Martha’s complaint. Jesus says that sister Mary has hit upon the “one thing needful”, and so seems to say that her sitting at Jesus’ feet in devoted listening to him is more important than Martha’s concern to prepare their meal. The copyists knew that we have to eat and that it’s righteous to be a good host to guests, so they wondered in what sense attending to Jesus’ teaching could be “the better part” over Martha’s attention to the necessities of nature and society. Surely, as the variant texts propose, there are a “few” things that matter and not only one.

On hearing the story, it is almost impossible not to think in either-or fashion, and we almost always do. It seems we have to choose between work and prayer. This corresponds to other dualisms in our heads – doing versus hearing, nature versus spirit, science versus faith, worship versus mission. Some modern readings wonder what Luke (and Jesus) are doing with gender roles, adding a male versus female dualism to the mix.

Faced with this perception of what is at stake, there are a couple of options before us – probably another dualism itself! We can choose between the options, or we can seek a kind of compromise. The *choice* is generally simply too hard: how can we properly be “only” spiritual or only worldly, only Martha or only Mary? We can’t, but still Jesus’ words jar harshly against one of these apparent options: she has chosen *the better* part. A *compromise* is a balancing act and seems to work: we know ourselves to be both matter and spirit, knowing and believing. And so we seek a balance: now a bit of body, now a bit of spirit; now I believe and trust, now I reason and know. And yet this doesn’t work, either. The problem with a balanced approach to holding opposites together is that your balance looks *imbalanced* to me, and my balance is an *imbalance* to you. This is Martha’s accusation about Mary: Lord, confirm that I have got the balance right by telling Mary that she has got it wrong.

The problem with Martha’s call for balance is that there is no reliably defensible unpacking of all our either-or moral polarities. Polarities are either-or *by definition*: black cannot be balanced with white if we define black simply as not-white. If worship

is not-service, faith is not-reason and private is not-public, then there is no true reconciliation possible in these life options but only “balance”. We can’t agree on the balance, so we shift the problem of how to live together before God a little to the polarised left or right until our anxieties move and we shift the other way again.

Who we are and what we do – and the *rightness* of our identity and choices – is defined solely in terms only of the world itself. Prayer is defined not in relation to God but over against work; mission is defined not in relation to God but in relation to worship – *our* worship work, *our* mission work. *We* have faith here but reason there; *we* trust here but know there. And then we debate which is the more important, or which applies where, how the money should be spent, whose efforts better reflect the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God being somewhere outside of what we do and are.

None of this can be resolved on its own terms and so, with the ancient copyists, we have to alter the text, knowing that we’re mucking around with it and knowing also that it doesn’t make the problem go away. It just makes Jesus seem more reasonable – and so more like us as we seek to be reasonable and balanced. There is, however, nothing very balanced about Jesus, from the perspective of polarised lives like ours.

What could save us from this deathly existence? What could save us from the consignment to mere choice between options on our part, and then from the need to justify to ourselves, to each other and to God our choice for more of this and less of that?

What could save us here? The answer is scandalous. What will save us is the recognition *it does not matter* what we do.

This can’t be true, of course. And yet, from a Christian sense of God and the human being, it is. It does not matter whether you are working in the kitchen or sitting at Jesus’ feet. It matters that you do and be *something*; this is called being alive. And what you do will properly span the spectrum between the poles of our dualisms; it will be private or public, faith or reason, and so on. But no choice here is, in itself, more godly than the rest. Christian faith holds that our lives are *already* hidden with Christ in God, and do not become so through the things we are or do. This faith holds that it is Christ-in-us who does the praying *and* the working – such that holiness *precedes* what we do and is not applied afterwards. To say that there is no condemnation in Christ is to say that doing and being “right” has already been covered.

Jesus’ comment to Martha, then, is not that she too should be sitting at his feet, but that she should not allow herself to be distracted “by many things” from her particular responsibility at that time. Martha’s problem is not that she is in the kitchen – where for the moment she must be – but that she wants to be sitting at Jesus’ feet. Distraction is the inability to be where we are. Now is the time for rest, but we are distracted by the things we think need doing, and so neither rest nor work properly. Now is the time for faith, but we want to analyse, understand and calculate, so we finally neither trust nor know. Now is the time for worship, but we cannot get the world’s needs out of our heads; now is the time for “mission” and service, but we’re not sure we’re doing the right thing. Distraction has to do with anxiety – am I OK? Is *this* right, or *that*? Am I properly here, or there? Martha is distracted by many things – not least that Mary is not in the kitchen and that she, Martha, is not with Jesus.

And distraction has to do with judgement – first judgement of ourselves and then often of others and God. There seems to be another version of this story in John’s gospel (John 12.1-8) – familiar to many of us but not often connected to today’s version. In John, we are again at Martha and Mary’s house and hear again that “Martha served”.

Mary is not “merely” sitting and listening to Jesus but takes a jar of perfume worth a year’s wages and pours it out as an anointing on his feet. In response, it is not Martha who complains to Jesus but Judas: Could this valuable thing not have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor? Is not our serving mission more important than worship? Is this not wholly (unholy) out of balance? Jesus’ response is no less appalling than in today’s (Luke’s) version: “*Leave her alone...* You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me”; there will always be mouths to feed but not always me to hear. Mary has done the right.

The strange word of Jesus is that it is OK for Mary to be with him, for now, without distraction. And that it is OK for Martha, for now, to be in the kitchen.

It is OK – or, in Christian-speak, it is *righteous* – to be where we are and to rest in that place, for now. It is OK not to be all things to all people, and even more OK not to be all things to God. It is OK not to know, or not to have done. It is OK to be a discrete, finite, mortal creature, the purpose of whose being is not to do and be all things but to do and to be according to the time and space given to us. Sometimes this will mean doing the dishes – and perhaps more often than we might think. Sometimes it will mean closing the door and our eyes and spending time with God – and perhaps more often than we might think.

The “one thing needful” – and the most difficult of all things – is to rest in the freedom and peace that God has already accepted us as we are, and will accept us as we become a different and new thing tomorrow. This is God in and for the world.

And this is what makes possible that we might be in and for God, and in and for ourselves: sometimes looking like we are working and sometimes looking like we are praying but, in all things, always thriving and alive in God.

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