

Luke 10:38ff. — Mary and Martha's hospitality

The story of Martha serving while Mary sits around, bone idle, is of course one of our favourite opportunities to feel indignant with Jesus for being wrong, and expressing sympathy with Martha for getting the potatoes on and the floor swept!

In Jesus's vindication of Mary it is easy to see him encouraging the contemplative life over the active one, but it is not quite as simple as that. According to Joel Green (whose commentary I read) this story is really focused on *hospitality*. Martha has her assumptions about hospitality, Mary's version is very different, and Jesus ends up adjudicating.

And the simplest way I know of to explain this is to say that hospitality is to give attention. It is attending to your guest's needs and desires as closely as you are able to in the circumstances. If I invite you for dinner, and know you are vegan, but present you with Lancashire hotpot followed by all butter shortbread you are likely not feel well looked after, or attended to. If I welcome you in, sit you in the living room and then leave you alone for two hours while attending to the cooking and never really speak to you, then you may appreciate the food but wonder what the purpose of the evening was. If we end up back at my place and it is clear that you want to talk but instead I start vacuuming because it 'looks like a bomb hit it', then perhaps I should have just asked you to forgive the mess while we hunker in the kitchen and make toast and chat.

Luke wants us to see that hospitality is attending to Jesus with some reference to *what kind of attention he might actually want!* Instead of seeking Jesus's desires, Martha instead attempts to co-opt Jesus into *her* plans, to get Mary off her lazy bottom and lend a hand!

So this story *is* about hospitality, and specifically towards Jesus. But as such it also extends to how we receive Jesus into our hearts, into our thoughts, into the practice of our lives. This is where that contemplation vs. action debate comes.

I have had too many days when I was too busy to pray. There was loads to do, and if I attempted to pray at all I was a distracted mess, just like Martha — thoughts flying everywhere. At those times I would feel indignant if anyone told me that I should have prayed. You don't know what I'm dealing with here! And I'm trying to do the Lord's work!

But I can also hear those words of Jesus, through wiser mentors than me, that you are not too busy to pray. The American pastor Bill Hybels wrote a book called 'Too busy *not* to pray'. Jesus tells us 'come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' Somehow, amidst sometimes frantic busy-ness, prayer is really essential. Prayer may be that occasion to stop

and breathe — to sharpen the axe, so that having prayed our work is more effective.

To go with the theme, prayer is not you demanding God's attention (we are not Martha) but *at least* 50:50 you giving God attention. How? Read the Bible. Read it slowly, read it again. Pause on these words. Is anything jumping out at you? Is there anything you feel Jesus wants you to notice today? What is Jesus asking of you today?

I think this moment with God can be a moment of 'character reset'. You are in the presence of God, how do you wish to behave? Are you living today with humility and grace?

Now, invite Jesus to help you. He loves to help. He loves to bless your actions. Busy day? Invite Jesus into the busy-ness. Stressful day? Invite him to help carry the stress. High emotions? Share them honestly.

With this having happened, you may find that your heart has already widened — not only focused on your own burdens, but able to think of what others carry too. Now is the time for intercession. God's heart is so wide, and building our relationship with him he invites us to love and pray for those God loves too.

There are lots of tools that can help us 'sit at Jesus's feet'. Common Worship daily prayer comes on a free app for your smartphone (but also as a book if you prefer), there is also a lectionary³⁶⁵ app — a daily short study and meditation. You can find a very simple liturgy from the Welsh retreat centre ffald-y-brenin, or you can get Celtic Daily Prayer from the Northumbria community. Those are tools that I have used and liked, but there are many more. You can pray once a day, twice a day, four times a day: morning, midday, evening and night. The point is that it is good to invite Christ into your life, into your day, in to your joys, hopes, anxieties and everything else.

I'm no paragon. I get bored of what I'm doing, and need to regularly try something different to keep my prayer active and alive. But: personal prayer is something like the backbone of active Christian faith. It is work, but it is also joy. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is John 10:10 — 'I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.' Hosting Jesus in our lives, welcoming him and attending to him must be the starting point of that fullness of life.

The truth is that Jesus does not offer a contrast of *either* action *or* contemplation. He invites us into both, but founded on our listening to him — sitting at his feet — as Mary did. It is the first thing that Jesus wanted then. It is the first thing he wishes of us now.

Amen.

