

Being Ourselves Pentecost 8 - 18th July 2010

Readings:

Luke 10: 38-42

Do you ever get up in the morning, look in the mirror - and feel just a little dissatisfied with what you see there? Do you ever dream of being someone else, like I used to when I'd ride home from the Saturday matinee upon my faithful but imaginary horse putting the world to rights?

Well listen, for this sermon might be for you. It's definitely for me.

But first, a story - one of my favourites - from Japan about a Tea Master and a Samurai. There was once a great and wise samurai who was on a grand tour of medieval Japan, they did that sort of thing in those days. And he had a huge entourage that followed him around.....

- Tea master borrows the samurai's armour whilst he slept
- Parades around the town dressed as the Samurai
- Meets a Samurai with a reputation as a bully
- Challenge
- Returns home and replaces armour and confesses.
- Samurai not angry instead - Make some tea!
- Tea master makes the tea - with all the moves

Samurai receives an inspiration

Tells tea master to meet the Samurai at the appointed place

Dressed as a tea master and carrying the samurai's armour

Next day tea master comes and sets up his tea paraphernalia

Evil Samurai first laughs then gets scared

If this is how he makes tea - how will he fight.

Apologises and runs off.

The tea maker learns the secret of self acceptance - Know who you are!

Know where you are! Know what you are doing!

Know who you are. Be really present where you are. Do what you are gifted to do. Which brings me neatly to the gospel reading set down for today. It's a passage that has often been interpreted by preachers as Jesus telling his disciples to be like Mary rather than poor distracted Martha. Mary's the one who sits quietly at Jesus' feet, listening to what he has to say, while Martha's the one who runs around making sure all is in place for offering hospitality to a famous rabbi like Jesus.

Now maybe it's because I'm a lot like Martha, but I've always thought that Jesus gave her a hard time. There she was, minding her own business, when suddenly, Jesus and a whole congregation of disciples land on her doorstep seeking hospitality. What was she to do? Sit down with Mary and listen? Then who would have extended the necessary welcome? Who would have prepared the necessary meal of hospitality?

Martha did have things that she had to do.

So what does this little gospel passage have to say to us? What lesson is Jesus teaching here? Is he really saying that quiet piety is to be preferred more than busy action? I don't think so. The gospel passage that we heard last week comes just before this one and Jesus tell the story of the priest, the Levite and the good Samaritan. One activist and two "pietists" if you like. And this story of Martha and Mary is a continuation of the same lesson - only from a different point of view.

Jesus' point is that he does not want people to choose between activism and piety. We need both if we are to be faithful disciples of Christ. Sure faith without works is dead -that's the lesson in the story of the Good Samaritan. But equally works with faith is also a deadly path - it usually leads to burnout. That's the point of today's story.

And maybe a clue is to be found in Martha's complaint about her sister Mary. Distracted and perhaps even resentful because of her many tasks, Martha complains, " Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Martha is not content with her lot and it turns her bitter against her sister. How many of us have experienced Martha's complaint?

Now my guess is that if Jesus had told Martha to stop working and come and sit at his feet, it would have driven her mad, having to sit still and listen. Some of us are like that. We are natural born activists.

But others of us are like Mary, those who prefer to sit and listen, not out of any laziness, but because this is the gift God has given. Jesus, in saying Mary had chosen the better part, may have been simply saying that Mary was being true to her nature. She was one who could sit and learn by listening. Martha, if she was to be true to who she was would have to do more. Her gifts demanded action, and thank God for that. So what was the point in getting all bitter and twisted when each sister was merely doing what came naturally to them. I don't believe that Jesus was telling Martha to become more like her sister Mary, but rather that Martha should become more like herself, she should honour that part in herself that was doing honour to her God, doing honour to Jesus. Providing hospitality.

Often our churches, having made the judgement about how good Christians should be, often try to mould us into a certain form. Perhaps it's the quietist Mary, that is favoured so that we all should praying and listening. Or more often it's the activist Martha that is favoured where we are all expected to be doing something practical for the Lord as if our Lord needs to have something done for him.

The point I'm making is that often we are expected to fit a mould. But Jesus is calling us to be more truly ourselves. To know who we really are and act accordingly.

It is my belief that in meeting with Jesus the Christ we are able to understand more fully who we are. Taking time too sit at the feet of Jesus and thereby learning what gifts we each have.

Perhaps our gift is to sit quietly with others and to listen to them, to pray with them. Perhaps our gifts are more about baking a cake for someone, extending hospitality to another, doing something practical.

But whatever it is, little is served by comparing ourselves with others and resenting the other because they do things differently. Both Martha and Mary - just as they are, were needed in Jesus' ministry.

In this church we have our fair share of Marthas and thank God for that. We also have our Mary's and thank God for that also. Our task in following Christ is discover through him who we are and how best we can serve him. How best we can truly be ourselves.

But I can't help but think that the Marthas among us might find room for Mary behaviour and vice versa. True wholeness in Christ come when we honour both Mary and Martha. Whilst one way might be dominant we carry both inside us it comes out of balance when we behave one way only. And just as our Tea Maker went out to face his lot with both the Samarai's armour and his tea making equipment, we are asked to bring our activism and our piety together - That is the greater part Jesus is talking about.

So let me finish with a poem prayer that I carry around in my diary. It's one that I have fallen back on many times, and it is one that is helping me discover who I truly am.

**God, grant me
the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.
AMEN.**

Rev Tony Duncan

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