

16th Sunday: Martha and Mary

Who is your closest friend? Why are they close to you? Did Jesus have special friends? Are you one of them? At Bethany just outside of the teeming metropolis of Jerusalem lived some close friends of Jesus: Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The Gospel is all about the two sisters and how they relate to Jesus. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42). Before we probe into what was happening, note that Jesus may have arrived at the home with some of his disciples, so there may have been quiet a crowd present, who needed food and drink. Back then, all food had to be baked and water had to be carted from the well in the village. Any and every meal involved much effort and time: a fire had to be lit, so wood had to be gathered and so on. So we can fully understand Martha's plea for help and yet, Jesus seems to say otherwise. So what is going on?

In order to answer this question, we need to ask another one - what is the 'one thing that is needful' (or this translation says 'few are needed – indeed only one')? What is that one thing? St. Gregory the Great, pope and doctor of the Church, exclaims that it is not that Martha is active and Mary inactive that matters, but that Martha's activity or busyness was not Christ focused. After all, He alone is the One thing needful. Martha was busy for business sake. And in so doing had replaced the who for a what. We must always maintain that focus – on Who is the most important - even when, we are very busy. Some people love to be active and industrious because it makes them feel worthwhile or fulfilled. But is that a good enough motive? Generally, whenever we are doing something, filled with much activity, we should ask ourselves, why or for whom are we doing this. And ideally speaking the motive should be ultimately for God's sake or his glory. It is his will that we should seek most of all – even when it seems improbable or impossible. We note this lesson in the first reading, when God is planning Abraham's family, as our father of faith, that Sarah is bemused by the heavenly visitors who predict her pregnancy while she is in her nineties. No wonder she laughed, who wouldn't – hence the name of the child, for Isaac means laughter.

Behind the event of Martha and Mary, lies also the nucleus of all vocations: for Christ calls us all to follow him in some capacity. Throughout the history of the Church, those called fall into one of two apostolic camps: the active or the contemplative. The active are the Josephite & Mercy Sisters, Marist brothers, Nazareth & Immaculata Sisters; while the contemplatives are the Benedictines, Carmelites, Trappists. Both are focused on God but one directs their activity via love of neighbour to God and the other directly loves God in himself via prayer. Some orders manage to straddle both vocations, such as the Missionaries of Charity who spend hours daily in Eucharistic adoration before their caring for the poor. What we do note is that one leads to the other and one needs the other. It is said that behind every effective apostolate lies a powerhouse of prayer. For behind every light bulb lies a power station. That is expedient now, while we are here in this world, but in the next life it may differ, for it is said that: "For the merits of the active life are great, but of the contemplative, far better." Why? Because in heaven – our ultimate goal – is full time contemplation, the face-to-face beatific vision of God for all eternity. And nobody shall be bored.

During this week, the Church lines up a superb array of active and contemplative souls from the communion of saints – our brothers and sisters in heaven. St Lawrence of Brindisi – active Franciscan, preacher and teacher; St Mary Magdalen – disciple and contemplative; St Bridget of Sweden – mother and mystic; St Charbel – priest and contemplative; St James – active bishop and apostolic; Sts Joachim and Anne – grandparents of Jesus, parents of Mary, who had to be both active in the world and contemplative at home with their perfect daughter. Irrespective to which branch of Godly service, we are called, we do stop and thank those who have gone before us, parents, godparents and grandparents, who have left us a legacy of faith and prayer, may we pass it on by being faithful to God's will and our daily prayer.