

## **Equilibrium in Prayer on the Road to Healing and Wholeness**

### **A Retreat for those involved in Mental Health Pastoral Care**

**Tuesday**

#### **Talk 2 – The Martha and Mary Conundrum**

“In the course of their journey he came to village, and a woman names Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the Lord’s feet and listened to him speaking. Now Martha was distracted with all the serving and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me.’ But the Lord answered: ‘Martha, Martha,’ he said ‘you worry and fret about so many thanks and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her.’”<sup>1</sup>

This is, perhaps, a problematic Gospel text for many of us! Am I a Mary? Am I a Martha? Is it really better to be a Mary than a Martha? If I am a Martha, am I inferior? If I am a Martha, am I resentful of those who are Mary’s? Or do I commit a sin of pride and consider the Mary’s inferior? If I am a Mary, do I consider the Martha’s to be “below stairs”? Do I think these words about Martha and Mary are not for me at all?

I am not proposing to get in to any scripture exegesis about this passage, seeking to determine whether Mary of Bethany is also Mary of Magdala, or Mary the wife of Clopas for that matter! This is not our purpose here.

Rather, I would like to suggest that the encounter between Jesus and these two sisters has much to say to us: as Church, as Individuals, and to the different parts of ourselves as individuals (without wishing to sound schizophrenic!) – for there is something of the Martha and of the Mary in each one of us. We ignore both at our peril for the qualities lived out by Mary and Martha are present in us all, to varying degrees, and we must be open to both ‘sides’ – as it were – if we are to find equilibrium, balance in our lives.

#### **The danger of Dualism**

One of the difficulties that we face, perhaps in our modern age more than in previous times, is the tendency to compartmentalise our lives. If you are user of apps, you don’t need to look far to see just how many apps there are that are designed to help you organise your life. From Outlook to Evernote, there are more and more of these gismos around.

This danger of compartmentalisation – the over-organisation, almost, of life – produces some very strange results when it comes to living our our lives. It can be good to detach work from home sometimes, to be able to detach from the difficult situation so that it does not weigh us down to breaking-point, but the danger of ‘keeping God in a box’ is very real. God becomes something for Sunday – for instance – put away in the cupboard until we next go to Sunday Mass. God is someone to whom we speak only in a special kind of way – perhaps very polite, imagining that God will only listen to a particular style of language. For others, God becomes an insurance policy, there in a fix. It is often said that there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole – and it is interesting to see with those in the Armed Forces that God’s presence is very real to them on operations, but not when the tour of duty in Afghanistan is over.

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<sup>1</sup> Lk. 10:38-42

More mundanely, we can forget that God is there in the midst of our all-to-busy lives. We shall get around to God when we have a moment, or when the circumstances are just right. The danger then is that we don't get around to God at all, because we allow the busy-ness of the everyday round of 'stuff' to completely take over. Waiting until everything is 'just right' – as we see it – may well mean that we are waiting for ever.

Alternatively, the danger can arise where we abandon our responsibilities to others and to the wider world as a result of a misguided notion that we are meant for something greater. The daily round, the responsibilities to family, to friends, to parish, are beneath us. They get in the way of what we are really about – or so we think.

There is the danger of a dualism in us, therefore – the dualism of activism and recollection. We see Martha and Mary as mutually exclusive, whereas they are really complementary.

## **Mary**

There is a contemplative in every one of us, for we are all 'hard wired' for God and the call to gaze upon the face of the Lord; the to rejoice in his love for us and to offer prayer for our brothers and sisters is in every person. In this regard, we are reflections of the Lord himself, who spent much time in prayer before his heavenly Father:

“In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayers there.”<sup>2</sup>

So, there is a Mary of Bethany in every one of us. It was not that Martha's busy-ness was not good – rather that Mary, in the presence of the Lord Himself, answered the call simply to listen.

This listening must be part of our prayer too. Sometimes, even our prayer can be too busy. The conversation can be very one sided at times, while all the time the Lord seeks to speak to us in the silence of our hearts. André Louf, at one time the Abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Mont des Cats on the French/Belgian border, wrote a book entitled “Tuning in the Grace”<sup>3</sup>. This is, I think, the most helpful of expressions. In the midst of all our busy-ness, we are called to adjust the tuning a little, to find that spot – in the midst of all the static – where we find that silence where God abides.

Another way to look at it is simply to think in terms of the catechism definition with which many of us were brought up: “Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God.” This does not describe a monologue on our part, simply the raising of the mind and heart. St. Benedict puts it another way, when he calls us to “listen with the ear of your heart.”<sup>4</sup> Raising of the mind and heart; listening. These are actions of love. The one who loves seeks to offer the mind and heart to the lover – and to receive mind and heart from the one who is loved. The one who loves listens to the voice of the other – and is listened to as well. So it is with God, God shares his love with us. He wants us to receive that love. We are called to love in return.

One of the difficulties that is, perhaps, a testimony to the modern age is an oft-felt desire to assess our prayer lives. Have I 'succeeded' in prayer? Have I 'failed' in prayer? Such questions are meaningless. As the late Cardinal Hume put it:

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<sup>2</sup> Mk. 1:35.

<sup>3</sup> LOUF, A., *Tuning in to Grace*, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> RB. Prol. 1.

“The only ‘failure’ in prayer is when we neglect it. The only ‘success’ in prayer is the sense of God’s presence, or a deep peace and sense of God’s presence, a marvellous moment of inner freedom. When that comes, it is a special gift from God. We have no claim on it, we cannot demand it. Our part is to turn to him as best we can, trying to raise our minds and hearts to him.”<sup>5</sup>

That ‘special gift’ was given to Mary of Bethany and it is granted to us too, according to God’s will for us.

In the Gospel, Jesus calls those who do his will “friends”.<sup>6</sup> It is only natural that we wish to spend time with our friend, that we would wish to spend time with the one who loves us so much that he gave his life for us on the Cross. Cardinal Hume again:

“Friends must waste time together. It is also thus in prayer. Prayer is making friends with God and he with us. Prayer is wasting time with God.”<sup>7</sup>

It was thus that Martha accused Mary – wasting time with their friend. Hume goes on to say:

“Personal, private prayer: that is when we find ourselves wanting to steal a few minutes out of the day just to be alone with God, trying to give him our attention, trying to focus our thoughts on him, trying to listen when he speaks to us.”<sup>8</sup>

There is little speaking on our part here – rather it is a question of **being** with the one who loves us. Like Mary, we sit at the feet of the Lord and listen to him. That is contemplation and, as I have said, there is a contemplative in every one of us.

## **Martha**

Martha, in the Gospel, gives us an example of service. Jesus tells us that Mary had chosen the better part – so what does that say of Martha. It is not that service is a bad thing; far from it. We know from the Gospel that service of others is a demand on every person called to follow Christ, for Christ himself is THE Servant, the Suffering Servant who gives all for us. Rather, Jesus words to her are a call to a sense of equilibrium, a call to recognise that – in that moment – Mary had chosen the better part, seizing her opportunity sit and his feet and listen.

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you.”<sup>9</sup>

These words are Martha’s. She was a woman of very great faith and it is she who professes her in the divinity of Christ:

“Yes Lord,’ she said ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.’”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> HUME, B., The Mystery of Love, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 2000, p.47.

<sup>6</sup> Jn. 15:14.

<sup>7</sup> HUME, B., op.cit., p.47.

<sup>8</sup> HUME, B., op.cit., p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Jn. 11:21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Jn. 11:27.

Her service is itself an expression of her faith in the Lord, who we know from the Gospel loved her and her sister and their brother, Lazarus.<sup>11</sup> We too are called to serve as an expression of our Faith in the one who dies and rises for us. We are called to **doing** for the one who loved us.

So, there is a Martha in each of us too and, in the society in which we live, it is the doing that is valued, rather than the being. Jesus words to Mary were, then, prophetic, for we live in a world where service – or rather activity – is valued over being, no matter how valuable the activity might be. Like Martha, however, our service is to be motivated by faith, informed by faith, and an expression of faith. Thérèse of Lisieux expressed service in her doctrine of the “Little Way” – doing all things, even the smallest thing, for Christ. That too is our calling, our vocation.

## **Balance**

So, in Martha and Mary we see the balance, the equilibrium to which we are called. Service without Contemplation is in danger of becoming mere activism. As James points out in his letter:

“You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds – now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show.”<sup>12</sup>

The ground of our good deeds is that relationship with Christ, expressed in our prayer. Jesus spent time in prayer to the father and then went to preach in the towns of Galilee and Judea. That must be our pattern too – prayer, leading to service. It is this way that will ensure our action is well-grounded, enabling us to bring the person of Christ to those whom we serve, rather than simply ourselves.

Without prayer, without that relationship of friendship, or love, with and for Christ, we are in danger of believing that we are the ones doing everything. This is pride. In the Carthusian Order, the *Confiteor* is different to that used in other parts of the Church. It goes like this:

I confess to God and to you, my brothers,  
that I have greatly sinned by my fault through pride,  
in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done and what I have failed to do;  
I ask blessed Mary and all the Saints,  
and you, my brothers, to pray for me.<sup>13</sup>

This is a rather simpler text, even that the previous translation that is known to us. What is interesting here is those words ‘by my fault through pride’. They are there because the Order was always concerned that their reputation as the strictest contemplative Order in the Church might cause a sin of pride to grow.

No, we must remember that, as St. Paul reminds us, we are “only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure.”<sup>14</sup> It is the love of Jesus that sustains us – in the Sacraments, in the Church, in the Scriptures, in our times of prayer. It is the love of Jesus that we are called to share with those whom we serve.

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<sup>11</sup> Jn. 11:5.

<sup>12</sup> James 2:18.

<sup>13</sup> From The Carthusian Missal.

<sup>14</sup>

Let us, like Mary, sit at the feet of the one who loves us and calls us to love him. Let us, like Martha, express our real and living faith in the Risen Lord through service of him in others, grounded in that relationship of prayerful love. It is this path – even though we may fail on the way many times – that will bring us peace and wholeness and will enable us to bring healing and peace to others.