

SERMON – 20/7/25**'Martha and Mary'**

Luke 10:38-42 and Acts 6:1-7

"'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one.'" (Luke 10:41-42)

Once again this morning we turn to Luke chapter 10 and the start of the final push of Jesus' earthly ministry as He sets off resolutely for Jerusalem and the culmination of His mission at Calvary.

A fortnight ago, Irene looked with us at the story of the sending out of the 72 to go ahead of Him to the villages He would pass through on His way to the city, preparing the way for the Lord. And I took that same passage when I preached that day at the Great Church in Debrecen, noting that although the 72 had been commissioned to take no bag or purse and to greet no-one on the way, we had just travelled with bag-loads of luggage to Hungary, chatting to all sorts of people on our journey. What kind of missionaries were we, I wonder! Of course the circumstances of the final phase of Jesus' ministry were rather different from ours, but it is salutary to reflect on the call that all of us as followers of Christ are given, to share the Good News of the Kingdom and to pray for workers for the harvest of souls that God is preparing.

Last Sunday, while I enjoyed a Sunday in the pew in the Scots Kirk in Budapest, Alex reflected with you here on two slightly edgy encounters Jesus had, one with a Jewish teacher who was out to trap Him (and that prompted the telling of the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan) and the other with a Cannanite woman whose child was sick (that challenged Jesus Himself), encouraging us to be open to the presence of God in the people we meet.

Today we have read the story of two sisters (Martha and Mary) whose brother Lazarus Jesus will later raise from the dead, and we are invited again to consider how different people respond differently to Christ and find different ways to serve Him. I hope that we will find food for thought this morning not only as to how we each are being called to honour Jesus in our own lives but also

as to how we might honour the variety of ways other people fulfil their own Christian calling.

The short Gospel story we read earlier gives us a lovely little cameo picture of an encounter that in reality probably lasted a good chunk of a whole day. Jesus and His close disciples are on the way to Jerusalem – there is an urgency in their journey, but they need to rest and to shelter and, of course, to eat. We're told that Martha opened her home to them, not only receiving them but actively welcoming them and offering generous hospitality. Now whether or not she had previously met Jesus (and from what we read elsewhere in the Gospels, she probably had) it was nevertheless no small undertaking to cater for such a big group of visitors – there would be tables to get ready, food to prepare and sleeping arrangements to organise for at least 13 people, and I think we can understand how Martha must have felt to see her sister just sitting at Jesus' feet listening to Him teaching God's Word while she was buzzing around like the proverbial blue-bottle.

As I read this little story again I was very strongly reminded of the second passage we read this morning, which is why I included it in the service. Fast forward from the story of Martha and Mary – Jesus' death and resurrection are now in the past and the young Church is rapidly growing in Jerusalem. Large numbers of people are coming to faith and the Christian fellowship is quickly having to adapt to the growing pains associated with a vibrant brand new movement. You might say they are victims of their own success in that there is such generosity amongst the believers, and such a desire to ensure that no-one is in need, that a programme of practical support for widows has emerged. Of course, whenever good things are happening in groups of human beings, complaints still emerge and the particular problem that arose here was that the Greek-speaking Christians felt that their widows were not getting as good a deal as the Hebrew-speaking widows when it came to the daily distribution of food, and the apostles (the same folk, of course, who had been with Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary probably not much more than a year earlier), already run off their feet preaching and teaching and offering prayer and pastoral support to those who were being added to the church every day, were getting sucked in to sorting out this argument

about food supplies. So they call a meeting of the believers to try and find a way forward.

The reason I think this passage from Acts came to my mind as I reflected on the story of Martha and Mary is that there are a couple of really key words that appear in both stories, although it's perhaps more obvious in the Greek than in our English translations. In the Gospel story we are told that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet 'listening to what He said' – in Greek, listening to *His Word* – while Martha was busy with 'all the preparations' – in Greek the word *diakonia* or 'service'. In the Acts passage we read of the apostles' concern that they would be forced to 'neglect *the Word of God*' in order to 'wait on tables' – in Greek again *diakonia*, serving tables.

On the face of it, there is a very clear hierarchy. Jesus says, "'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one.'" And He goes on: "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her." The sharing of *God's Word* comes first and practical service – *diakonia* – is secondary. But we still need to remember that the Gospel story takes place in the context of the urgency there was in Jesus' final push towards Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover, and we also need to take on board the insights that emerge in the early church when seven people are appointed to take responsibility for the early church's feeding programme.

In both stories there is an emphasis on the priority of the Word of God, but there is also a recognition that the offering of practical service is vital too if the Gospel is going to be heard. It's all about getting the balance right. If you look carefully at what Luke writes about Martha, Jesus describes her as being so distracted, worried and upset about many things – the seating arrangements, the catering arrangements, the sleeping arrangements – that her ears are closed to the Word of life that Jesus is sharing with her sister and everyone else who has gathered in the house. That is what Jesus is critical of, not the fact that she was serving.

Of course they needed to eat, but as Jesus says when Satan is tempting Him "You shall not live on bread alone but on every

word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4) And as He says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things – what you need to eat and drink and wear – will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33) There would be time for preparing and eating and sleeping but only *after* they had feasted on God's Word and if Martha had rested in Christ's company like her sister had, she actually would have had a whole lot more dedicated and enthusiastic help in the kitchen.

When the Early Church is faced with a similar dilemma and with none of the urgency there had been during Jesus' push to Jerusalem, some thought had to be put in to getting the balance right between preaching the Gospel and providing food for the hungry and again if you read carefully what Luke writes in the Book of Acts you will discover that there is no sense in which spiritual ministry is somehow more highly prized than practical ministry, or that practical service is something that just anybody can give, somehow a lesser calling. When the apostles call for suggestions for who might organise the food programme it's really significant that they are looking not just for willing volunteers but for people who are full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom and full of faith. (Acts 6:3,5) And I think it is also particularly significant in the light of the word play across this morning's two readings that when the apostles speak about the ministry of the Word, the Greek word used is '*diakonia*' the same word that is used of Martha's household preparations and the waiting on tables involved in feeding the Greek and Hebrew speaking widows.

I consider it a badge of honour to be called a minister not because it has some status to it but precisely because it is a word that literally means servant. My calling as a servant of the Word of God is precious to me and while that calling precludes me from getting distracted by waiting at tables, I want to honour those whose ministry it is to do just that and whose practical service whether in cooking or administration or buildings maintenance or financial planning provides the space for the work of sharing the Word to prosper.

You will have seen, I hope, the requests in the weekly intimations for volunteers to help support the work of KYTHE at this week's

Magnitude Festival at Lendrick Muir and that is a very good example of what we read about both in Luke's Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. At heart, Magnitude is about sharing the message of the Gospel with the hundreds of young people who will be attending and it's really important that priority be given to that during the limited time there is at the Festival, but equally nobody is going to be very receptive to the Gospel if they don't get anything to eat or drink for five days, so it is also really important that there are people willing to prepare food and get it to those who need it. The fact is there are many people who would feel entirely unequipped to teach the Word of God at a Christian festival but who at the drop of a hat can rustle up a lasagne or a traybake or will gladly deliver food to Lendrick Muir. Of course, if all that was happening at Magnitude was a camping trip with hearty meals included it would not be much of a Gospel ministry. The balance has to be right and it's that both/and that I want to leave you to ponder this morning.

I wonder, are you by nature a Martha or a Mary? In God's purposes we absolutely need both, and we each need to use the gifts we have been given to enable the whole Body of Christ to flourish. Our ultimate goal as the Church is to make known the unsearchable riches of Christ and we need to keep that vision before us as we set our priorities, so that we don't get distracted like Martha, worried and upset about many things, but each play our part in due time in ensuring that we find life in its fulness through every word that comes from the mouth of God.