

Address by Nigel Guthrie for 17th July 2022 at St David's Church

In St Luke's gospel the account we've just heard of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary follows immediately on from the story of the Good Samaritan; and it leads in turn on to Jesus' teaching about prayer, including the Lord's Prayer. So, it is not unreasonable to think that Luke has arranged these passages to express what he understood to be the fullness of the Christian faith: service of others, love for God and prayer.

But as so often in Luke's gospel, this teaching is made memorable through a good storyline. And it's not hard to feel sympathy for one or both of the sisters. At our recent clergy conference Bishop Emma Ineson led bible studies on three of the Marys that appear in the gospels. She commented about this account that we can easily feel annoyed with Mary who is sitting listening to Jesus while Martha flogs around the house presumably tidying up or preparing a meal. We've probably all felt like that at some point. We are working hard to get a job done while someone else, who we feel should be helping, is just sitting there: feelings of annoyance and resentment all too readily come to the surface.

We might also feel that it is unfair when Jesus praises Mary for her attentiveness and draws attention to Martha's distraction and anxiety. After all, if Martha wasn't busy Jesus wouldn't be getting any supper! But in her busyness she is missing the one thing that is really important in that moment: listening to Jesus. And for me this is the main point of the story. Our age seems to be increasingly, almost obsessively distracted. Notifications and emails constantly come in when we are trying to focus on a significant task. People look at their mobile phones instead of speaking to each other. And we are distracted by narratives which are pushed out by the media to try and keep our attention. It's a wonder that we get anything done! The problem is that we can become terminally distracted and get out of the habit of being able to concentrate on anything – let alone the still small voice of God and the reality of his loving presence with us.

I was very grateful to be able to get away for a short retreat this week at the Franciscan Friary at Hilfield in Dorset. The Franciscans are definitely more chatty than the Benedictines I usually go to for a retreat, but they were delightful, and very welcoming. It was a special for me to be able to arrive early for the services and spend some quiet time not having to think about what I have to say in the notices, and all the other detritus that fills the minds of clergy – well my mind, anyway. We should treasure these times in church before worship and I would encourage you to come early if you can and sit quietly and give thanks for the immense privilege we have of being able to worship together in freedom and without fear, part of our local congregation, but also part of a worldwide Christian family.

As with much of the Christian Church in the western world, the Franciscans are quite thin on the ground. But at one supper time I sat opposite the present Guardian at Hilfield, Brother Clarke Berge, who described the vibrant Franciscan community in the Solomon Islands where he had spent a year. They are known as the Melanesian Brothers that we have a link with here in Exeter

Diocese through Bishop John Patteson, perhaps some of you have met them when they have visited. These days the Melanesian Brotherhood are much concerned with environmental matters as a very significant part of their Christian witness, in particular campaigning to reduce the widespread logging in their Islands which are under extreme threat from climate change and in particular rising sea levels. They will be having a significant presence at the forthcoming Lambeth Conference which starts in ten days time and I'm sure that their vibrant and practical faith will help to put some of our own ecclesiastical troubles into perspective!

In a blog Brother Clarke describes his struggles to keep the Franciscan principles in order in his own life. They should be prayer, study and work but he recognises that for him their priority is often reversed and they become work, study and prayer. He refers to the writings of Brother Lawrence whose book "The Practice of the Presence of God" describes how everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning can become a way of prayer and of drawing close to God, rather than just an onerous necessity to be done as quickly as possible. It's a theme which is also expressed in the Anglican tradition. In his poem 'Elixir' which appears in our hymnbooks, Herbert captures this sense of all activity having the potential for praise "Teach me my God and King in all things thee to see, and what I do in anything to do it as for thee." ... and especially in the verse which runs "A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine: who sweeps a room as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine."

Brother Clarke admits that this is a constant challenge, not least when it comes to his least favourite job of cleaning the toilets! But, in fact, as Herbert writes God's ownership of the teaks can transform them "This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold; for that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be told."

There is currently something of a post-pandemic crisis in parishes and other organisations with a lack of volunteers coming forward to get involved or take on responsibilities. And I very much appreciate the willing contribution to church life of so many people here. But I'm also not surprised that there are problems because we were all forced to sit still at home for a long time and stop many of the activities which we had been involved with for years. Our foundations have been shaken. In this story of Martha and Mary we recognise the need to push back against the distractions of the world. But we also realise that we need to find a new patterns of work and leisure, of prayer and service in our lives and in our church. By God's grace may we find gold there.