

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 5 YEAR C AT GW AND WYLYE: 20-07-25 (based on Genesis 18:1-10a & Luke 10:38-42)**

**Action or contemplation.....?**

Today's readings are rich in themes to explore, but ultimately they all connect with two key commandments, that featured explicitly in last week's readings and implicitly in today's: I paraphrase - love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind, and your neighbour as yourself. Our passage from Genesis, is about Abraham's hospitality to three travellers. As tent-dwelling nomads, Abraham and Sarah would have depended for their survival on others living in and travelling through the desert. Visitors were therefore treated well, for they brought companionship and help for the host, sometimes even opportunities for trade. No wonder Abraham, and Sarah, rushed about so fervently, seeking out the best to offer their guests.

We can see a link here with the reading from Luke, where Martha also disappears to provide some sustenance for their guest, Jesus. Furthermore, the guests in both stories are divine. In Genesis, "The Lord appeared to Abraham...as he sat at the entrance of his tent", though when he looked up, he saw three men. Do they represent the Trinity in human form? That is certainly a later interpretation, and not without precedent, for early in Genesis, we hear of God walking about in the garden of Eden. The boundaries between human and divine are blurred ....and remain so in the New Testament in the person of Jesus himself. We are reminded by Paul, in Colossians, that Jesus is indeed the image of the invisible God. So, in these readings, we have the motif of the divine coming among us. A big question for us today perhaps, is how do we receive him?

Offering hospitality to travellers continued well into New Testament times. Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem in today's Gospel reading,

which comes straight after last week's parable of the good Samaritan. And probably for a reason. Showing hospitality to travellers on the road was a given, with hosts expected to provide food and shelter. It features as a strong social ethic in Luke, a foundation for good Christian behaviour, both within the community and in the world at large. In the Samaritan story, Luke advocates fully living out the second of Christ's commandments I alluded to at the beginning - to love our neighbour. We are to offer help, regardless of whether they are or are not like us, in nationality, faith or any other way. We are not being called upon to merely tolerate those who are not like us, but to exercise the Christian virtue of hospitality, to show love to our neighbour by what we do. Hmmm... why then does Jesus seem to reprimand Martha for prioritising her hosting duties over following Mary's example and listening to him?

I shall try to answer that by examining Martha's behaviour. She certainly comes across as flustered and bothered by Mary not coming out to the kitchen to help. Jealous of Mary getting Jesus' attention? Fed up with being the one having to do all the work while her sister just sits there? Because of the context, I doubt if either is the case. A man has been welcomed into the house of a woman, Martha - no mention of any other male present, just her sister Mary. So, two women play host to a man who is not a relation - possibly triggering a metaphorical twitching of net curtains down the street. But worse than that, Mary is audaciously sitting at his feet and listening to him! Sitting at the feet of a rabbi, or teacher, was what you did if you were wanting to be a rabbi yourself - only men did that in Luke's day. That could well explain Martha's distraction and worry, her anxiety to get Mary into the kitchen with her, where she felt they both belonged. I can't help but hear echoes of our Old Testament passage where Sarah was relegated by her husband Abraham to the kitchen part of the tent to make cakes.

Jesus is aware of Martha's worry about the situation. He says that Mary "has chosen the better part", ie that despite risking impropriety, she has chosen listening, contemplation of the word of God, over hospitality. It is not a matter of Mary being better than Martha. Neither is it one of putting a contemplative approach to living in faith above one of action. For welcoming the divine is not an either/or situation, but a both. The commandment to love God with our whole being requires spiritual sustenance, which we obtain through God's word, and which in turn gives us the strength to fulfil the commandment to love our neighbour and act upon it.

Furthermore, we see Luke's Jesus continuing to redraw boundaries. Last week, in the good Samaritan story, they were national, between Jews and outcasts; this week, they are gender-related, between men and women. Martha's concern over social propriety is effectively dismissed by Jesus. He clearly has no problem with Mary's disregard of her status as a woman when she sits at his feet. His call to discipleship is extended to women as well as men. God's love, favour, grace, however you want to put it, encompasses all - so why shouldn't Mary be a disciple? And of course Martha too - which is why I don't see Jesus' words as a rebuke, but rather as an invitation for her to follow Mary's example - and to stop worrying about what the neighbours might think!

So, how do we receive Christ nowadays? Like Martha, we all have thoughts that distract us, or 'vital' tasks that prevent us being simply still in the presence of God. But Mary could prioritise, and did. Receiving the divine may simply be a matter of inviting God into our heads and sitting with him a while. By doing so, we become host and guest, both loving God with all our heart and mind, and allowing him to look after us.

In the name of Christ, amen.