

SHOWING MERCY

Genesis 8. 1-10a
Colossians 1. 15-28
Luke 10. 38-42

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It is very easy to take a portion of Scripture and isolate it from its original context, and then use it as a justification to make some universal statement. The gospel text that has been given for today is a classic example. How many times has this snippet of only five verses been used to prove that hearing the word of God is more important than doing and keeping busy? When our Lord says, ‘there is need of only one thing’, many preachers and commentators have lifted this phrase out of the story and used it as a symbol for the importance of listening over doing.

The key to understanding this story about Martha and Mary is to realise that it occurs right after the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we considered last week. Today’s passage follows that parable not only sequentially, but also thematically. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary are to be interpreted together.

So to take us back very briefly: you may remember that the parable of the Good Samaritan is told by Jesus in response to a lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The lawyer’s question is answered after the parable concludes, when Christ asks, ‘And who was neighbour to the man?’ This is a subtle difference in emphasis. The Good Samaritan didn’t see the man who fell into the hands of robbers as his neighbour; the Good Samaritan realised that it was *up to him* to be the neighbour to the man. And the lawyer was forced to recognise that the one who was a neighbour

to the man was ‘the one who showed mercy’. ‘Go and do likewise’, our Lord said. Go and be a neighbour showing mercy.

With this interaction concluded, Jesus and his disciples go on their way. They enter another town, a more receptive one apparently, and a woman named Martha welcomes him into her home. From one village, arguing with one hostile lawyer in a public setting, Christ goes to another village, where he rests and relaxes with two adoring sisters, in the safety and intimacy of a private home. Unlike the people in the earlier, sceptical villages, these two women are believers. Unlike the great crowds that we have heard about before, now the multitudes recede into the background and the focus is only on three people: our Lord, Martha and Mary. The scene is quiet, domestic, hospitable and personal.

But things have not changed quite as much as we might think. Instead, the same conflict over responsibilities and obligations is repeated. According to Martha, Mary had left her sister to take care of all of the tasks of hospitality. Martha, St Luke says, was ‘distracted by her many tasks’, while Mary apparently did nothing. An important kind of nothing, sitting at Jesus’s feet and hearing what he had to say; but not a particularly helpful kind of nothing, in practical terms.

It isn’t very hard for us to imagine this scene. The bustling about, the fluffing of pillows, the hiding of clutter in closets, and then the pouring of drinks. As someone once said, one’s house is never as clean as it is five minutes before the guests arrive.

And all the while, Mary sits. Martha cooks; Martha cleans; Martha makes Christ as comfortable as possible, honouring him with her service. And Mary sits.

‘Who was neighbour to the man?’ ‘The one who showed mercy’. A similar question is being asked in this story, but implicitly this time. Who is being a neighbour? Which

one of the women is showing mercy? Is it the one in the kitchen? Or is it the one in the sitting room?

We may be tempted to exalt one sister over the other. But perhaps it is the case that in one sense, *both* were being a neighbour to our Lord. Without the one, you'd have no house (Luke says that it's Martha's house they go into); and you'd have no hospitality at all. Without the other, there wouldn't be that beautiful personal intimacy with Jesus that we might say made Martha's house a home.

When it comes to Christ, the sisters are complementary. Even more than that, they make each other possible. St Augustine wrote about them that 'Martha has to set sail in order that Mary can remain quietly in port'. Martha's actions make Mary's reception possible; and Mary's listening makes Martha's work meaningful. They need each other and the story needs both of them. Together, they enable our Lord to move out of the crowd and into the home, away from the antagonism of the lawyer and into the comfortable presence of friends.

Whilst Jesus affirms that it is Mary who has chosen 'the better part',¹ surely it is significant that it is only a 'part' or 'portion' that she has chosen, not the whole thing. To sit at the feet of Christ and to listen to his word: what could be a better part than

¹ In the Greek text of verse 42 what Jesus literally says is, 'One thing is needed: therefore, Mary has elected the good portion and it will not be taken from her.' Most Greek scholars tell us that the adjective *agathon* ('good') can be used as a comparative form, in that the actual comparative and superlative forms of Greek adjectives were waning by the time the New Testament was written. The context determines whether to translate *agathon* as 'good' or 'better'; and most scholars agree that the context of Luke 10. 42 indicate this should be not just the 'good portion' that Mary chose but the 'better portion'.

There is some indication that there may also be a bit of a pun being employed here in that 'portion' in the Old Testament often referred to a literal food portion at a meal. If so, then Martha's complaint about Mary's lack of help with the meal was answered by Jesus with a pun to say that Mary had seen the true banquet that had been laid before her that evening and chose to 'eat' a portion of that meal, which spiritually speaking is a lot more important than all the portions of a physical meal combined.

No matter how good supper had been that evening, the better meal being served was the one falling from Jesus's lips and being lapped up by Mary as she sat at the Master's feet. Given the superlative value of Jesus's spiritual banquet, even a 'good portion' would be the 'better' portion indeed (if not the best portion of them all). In this sense, this brief incident could be described as 'a tale of two suppers'.

that? In this situation, which portion of it would you want to have? Would you want to be the one slaving over the stove? Or the one sitting with our Lord? And yet it takes both.

Perhaps then we can see Martha's actions not as somehow ignoring the personal relationship with Jesus, in favour of busy work. Instead, Martha's serving could be seen as a kind deed that she is doing not only for Christ, but for her sister. Martha is making it possible for Mary to sit with our Lord, the 'better part' of that interaction. It is a gift that Martha is giving Mary, at her own expense. She gives away her right to the good portion.

Or shall I say, it *could have* been a gift. It could have been a gift if Martha didn't apparently resent giving it, complaining to Jesus about her sister and asking him to intervene. If there is a transgression on Martha's part, perhaps it is not the serving, but the fact that she had the opportunity to show mercy not only to Christ, but also to show mercy to her sister, by freely offering the gift of presence with our Lord; and given that opportunity, she did not take it.

So perhaps the question is not only which of the women was a neighbour and showed mercy to Jesus, but also which one was a neighbour and showed mercy to her sister. Martha and Mary illustrate for us that it is not only difficult to show mercy to the injured stranger on the road as in the Good Samaritan parable, but it can be just as difficult to do so within the context of one's own immediate community. They show us that the household dynamics inside a private family home can be just as fraught as a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, as in the parable.

In any quiet domestic sphere, there can be as many risks and injuries as there are on a dangerous highway, albeit of a different kind. The risk of giving and not being appreciated; the risk of receiving and not being grateful. To whom should I be

neighbour? To whom should I show mercy? The Good Samaritan parable says that the neighbours cross lines of religion and nationality. Martha and Mary remind us that being neighbour to those ‘inside the lines’ can be just as difficult.

Perhaps this is why the very next thing Luke recounts is Christ teaching the disciples the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Being neighbour’ can be a difficult thing to do on our own. It may even seem impossible. But we should never think that we don’t even have a hope of accomplishing it because, as Luke shows us, prayer is exactly what we do have.

Amen.