

St George's Anglican Church Malvern
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Yr C 21 July 2013
Luke 10.38-42

There had been a saying in circulation for at least a hundred years by the time of Jesus: "Let your house be a meeting place for the rabbis, and cover yourself in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily."

In the time of Jesus, the Jewish people prized the study of the scriptures. They still do, and we could learn from them! Many gifted teachers walked from town to town teaching the people and asking no pay in return. People were expected to open their homes, providing food and shelter to these wandering teachers and their disciples.

So, we honour Mary because she risked scandal to learn from Jesus, but Martha's hospitality was also an important support to Jesus in his ministry. Luke tells us elsewhere that women supported Jesus with their own money.

Rabbis sat to teach. Have you ever noticed how often the gospel writers tell us, 'Jesus sat down and taught the people...' Disciples would sit on the ground or on mats around them. Hence, 'sit at his feet' was an idiom for learning from a rabbi. Paul described himself as someone who had learned 'at the feet of Gamaliel.' It was his pedigree, like saying you've been to Oxford, or as they say in Melbourne, 'The University; pace the Monash and La Trobe people among us. I had a wonderful scripture teacher in the seminary who had so studied, and read, marked, learned and inwardly digested the scriptures that in his old age when he preached he sat down. It seem fitting as he was infused with the Spirit of Jesus.

So when Mary was described as "sitting at Jesus' feet," she was being described as a disciple. Clearly, Jesus welcomed her. Clearly she was behaving in a way that troubled her sister Martha and it wasn't all about the cooking. It was about the culture.

Luke's story cuts across the cultural gendered expectations of women in Jesus' day. If the story followed cultural expectations Luke would have said,

On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers accepted the invitation of a woman named Martha to share a meal in her home. Martha had a sister named Mary and they both got a meal ready for Jesus and the male disciples. The two women stayed out in the kitchen and so didn't hear what Jesus had to say.

Instead, Luke says,

Martha has a sister called Mary, who sat on the floor the moment Jesus arrived and hung on every word he said.

Mary behaved as the disciple of a rabbi behaved. She sat at Jesus' feet and she listened.

Luke continues,

Martha, on the other hand, was trying to do everything and was getting more and more flustered about it. She came in and said to Jesus, "Lord, doesn't it bother you that my sister has left all the work to me? Tell her to get off her butt and give me a hand." But the Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are letting so many things stress you out. There is really only one thing that everyone needs. Mary has made the right choice and it is not going to be taken away from her."

Now Jesus was not saying that preparing food was second rate, or that Mary was a better person than Martha. But, Jesus was saying, that having invited him in the first place, (Luke says it was Martha who welcomed) Martha was now greatly distracted by her work Her busyness was keeping her from the purpose of the invitation.

This is not a story about having to choose between being a disciple or a useful person. It is not about having to choose between learning about God or being on the morning tea roster. It is not, as it has sometimes been misused, a story that puts being contemplative above being active.

This story lets no one justify being busy *for* God as a substitute for being attentive *to* God. Jesus does not play these two sisters off against each other, though we often try to do that in the way we behave towards each other. We say 'the Mary's are the better people' and we let the Martha's act like put upon martyrs.

This is a story about what is to be of *primary importance* for those who follow Jesus. There is nothing more important *listening* to the word of God. When the prophet Amos rails against injustice, economic trickery and exploitation in Israel, the most terrible threat he makes is that there will come a famine, not of bread, but of the word of God. Doesn't the world's political landscape demonstrate the truth of that reality? I had to fight back the tears when I heard a women protesting about the treatment of asylum seekers say 'this policy does not come from a good heart'. Yes, I know the issue is complex but even God is never tough on us without at the same loving us, but we humans can't seem to emulate that. Or even try.

That word comes to us in the scriptures, in worship, in prayer and quiet, through the wisdom of others and the intuitions we have of what God is asking of us.

Nothing is more basic to the life of faith than listening. 'Listen' is the first word in the Rule of St Benedict upon which so much Anglican spirituality is built. 'Listen' is the first step in pastoral care of others. 'Listen' is the first thing to do when we offer hospitality, make space for the newcomer in our midst.

Distraction prevents listening. Distraction feeds resentment towards those who do listen. Jesus chides Martha's distraction from what matters, so that she can change her behaviour. Jesus says that Mary's commitment to listening can never be taken from her. It is the better way, the way of faith.

Listening to myself is a gift I give myself. Listening to another person is a gift I offer them. Listening to God is centring myself in God. Listening, of the sort Mary did, is giving attention to Jesus, risen Christ, and listening deeply, not just to his words, but to the pattern of his life.

Mary knew how to listen to God in Jesus, and Luke would have us know that we are to do the same.