

## Sunday 18 July 2010: Seventh Sunday after Trinity

### Christ in the House of Mary and Martha

**Readings: Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 10.38-end**

In the painting ‘*Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*’ by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez, the foreground is dominated by the face and demeanour of a woman who we take to be a cook; she is about her tasks, hands busy beating or whisking; sea bass lie on a plate, garlic on the table, eggs and red chillies, a flagon of water or wine on the table nearby. It is far from a still life. Emotion scuds across the woman’s face. Resentment, anger, tearfulness, so near to the surface that in the next moment we imagine she might throw to the ground the bowl she holds, turn to the old woman behind her and just let rip.

In the background, as if through a serving hatch, the scene of the gospel, Jesus with Mary seated before him and Martha angrily confronting him, offers us the context of the drama. The expression on our woman’s face suggests that all the drama of that scene is being played out inside her. John Drury in his book ‘*Painting the Word*’<sup>1</sup> suggests that what has taken place here is the older woman’s telling of the biblical story. The moment captured in the painting is the woman pondering on the words of Jesus to Martha that she has heard, reflecting on their implication in and for her own life.

What is it like to hear when you are up to your eyes with work, and tasks and things that have to get done, that what is really needed is stillness and focus and attention on Jesus? Being and doing, contemplation and action, it’s a very present tension in the lives of many people.

In a newspaper article this week about ‘slow reading’ the suggestion is that busyness has led us to lose the ability for careful and slow reading and deep attention.

*Because of the internet, it says, we have become very good at collecting a wide range of factual tidbits, we are also gradually forgetting how to sit back, contemplate, and relate all these facts to each other. "We're losing our ability to strike a balance between those two very different states of mind. Mentally, we're in perpetual locomotion".<sup>2</sup>*

17<sup>th</sup> century Seville, 21<sup>st</sup> century London, the problem of where our focus lies doesn’t go away. We are distracted by our many tasks. No time to dwell on the word – the written word, and the word that God speaks to us in the life of his Son.

In the Gospel story that comes immediately before this one we heard how the lawyer was told by Jesus to model the actions of the Samaritan who helped his neighbour. ‘Go and do likewise’ he is told.<sup>3</sup> Almost in the next breath we hear Jesus telling Martha that Mary’s choice to ‘stay and be and listen’ is the best path. Jesus himself models this tension throughout his ministry. Times of activity and engagement with crowds, healing and teaching, are contrasted with time set aside alone or with his closest followers; to listen to his father, to contemplate and pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John Drury, *Painting the Word, Christian Pictures and their Meanings*, Yale University Press, 1999, p.158

<sup>2</sup> *The Art of Slow Reading, The Guardian*, Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010, Patrick Kingsley

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10.37

The early church struggled to find this balance too. In Acts we hear the disciples voice this dissonance, *'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God to serve at tables'*. As a solution they re-structured the community, choosing some to serve at tables, while we hear, they devoted themselves to prayer and serving the word.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that those chosen to serve were chosen because they were full of the spirit and wisdom and that the decision made to create this balance in the church pleased the whole community. They knew their need for both forms of ministry.

Earlier in the Gospel when Jesus sent off the seventy disciples he told them to receive the hospitality they are offered as they entered people's homes; to eat and take what is given. As he comes to this home, Jesus does the same. Now he is coming to the places he himself intended to go. He also tells the disciples to cure the sick and to say that the Kingdom of God has come near.

His words to Martha bring her home to where she is. Christ is in her house, the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus is beside her. Jesus repeats her name, as if to get her attention and steady her. Martha is not centred or restful, her life is in disorder. We get the impression that she is working too hard, doing too much, so much so that her resentment is overflowing. She is consumed by what she is doing. There is no space around or within her; her activity a barrier to the kingdom of God coming close. A barrier to Christ's love and ways becoming part of who she is, not just something that she might get to when everything else is done.

So what happens when we stop and listen for God's word? Well usually, all sorts of distractions cross our minds. What happens if we stay there, allowing thoughts and concerns to pass? In *The Cloud of Unknowing*<sup>5</sup> the unknown 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic says we should let go of all that we know of God, all that we know of his goodness, and only be aware that we don't know him – that there is a 'cloud of unknowing' between. That is the place that we start from, listening and searching for him. Once we do that we are into uncharted waters. We are out of the zone of comfort, into the realm of discovery and there we are supposed to stay, our only prayer like arrows of love, a deep desire to know God and understand. A desire to come through this cloud and find him.

'Loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind' is not submissive or passive, it is an active process; listening and stilling oneself requires attention and focus and desire. If we are able to still our souls, centred and listening then out of that listening and stillness and being known before God, for who we are and not for what we do, then out of that will flow the deep concern for the well-being of other people and for all that is around us. That place of listening becomes the wellspring from which we find life, not the place where we hide from it. It may be the source of great activity. But whatever comes from it, if we live from that place, we won't be skimming through life, living at the surface but engaging deeply, with what we are about, with what is around us, and with who is around us.

What you notice if you look at the original of the Velazquez painting, which is in room 30 at the National Gallery next door, is that it is the product of a deep contemplation on life. Fish, garlic, eggs, the reflection off the glaze on the jug, as well as emotions on a woman's troubled face, are an engagement with what is real, in that moment.

If we take time to sit before God, listen to his word and gaze upon him, in the person and actions of Christ, we will find that when we pick up the ordinary things with which we have

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 6.2

<sup>5</sup> *'The Cloud of Unknowing'*, Tr. Clifton Walters, Penguin Classics, first published 1961

to do, engage with the people whose faces we contemplate, the activities that are on our lists, it will be with a sense that far from being an activity and occupation to one side, something that we don't quite get round to, the ways of Christ will be at the heart of it all.

In his letter to the Colossians Paul is encouraging a re-focusing and centering on who Christ is. To see him, is to see God – the portrait or image of God. He is before everything and at the heart of everything. For the Colossians, strongly influenced by Gnostic thought, the ideas of other powers and forces have diminished their belief in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Paul, in his use of this beautiful hymn that is a deep contemplation on Christ's being, re-marks the territory of understanding for this community. Jesus is not a side-show, to be engaged with alongside the other powers and demands of life. Paul reminds them that Christ is what makes them and sustains them and reconciles them and all of life to God. All of creation, the powers of heaven and 'fleshy' reality of everyday life are held in him.

As we struggle with the powers of our day, the tidal pull to busyness and a constant need to be across everything, perhaps we can allow ourselves to be brought back, to sit at the feet, to focus on the image of God in Christ; notice the detail, be guided to seek him and find him on troubled faces, in busy kitchens, in conversation, in emails, in reading, in activity and stillness, in ordinary and familiar places, and know that in our lives too *He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*