

SERMON: Sunday – 17 July 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

But Martha

Amos 8:1-12

Luke 10:38-42

STB Reflection

Which is the better part?

For years interpretation has sought to divide Martha and Mary determining that only one of them can be commended by our Lord, that only one way is important in the kingdom.

Yet, truth be told,

we know all too well

that we need those who welcome others doing all the things necessary to provide hospitality

as well as those

who will take time to listen,

affording intimacy.

And in both women

we see the norms of the day confounded yet again,

turned on their head

by women refusing to conform.

Martha, welcoming Jesus boldly as a head of a household might.

And Mary, sitting at the Rabbi's feet, as a disciple might.

Both, in their own way contributing to the table fellowship they shared.

And, we can imagine Jesus

taking the fruits of Martha's labour:

bread still warm from the oven,

its aroma filling the room,

and sweet, heady wine,

kept for just such an occasion

and, wrapped in the adoring gaze of Mary, transforming those gifts

in the knowledge

that the portent of death

was not missed in this home.

For here were two women

who simply got it

and, together, made room for the One in whom everything made sense

Two women who demonstrated that love does not consist in either/or

but in both/and.

Martha and Mary,

who recognised

that the kingdom was near.

Mary is commended by Jesus for making the better choice of sitting at the Lord's feet, listening to what he was saying.

But Martha

In those two words we might assume that Martha is doing the wrong thing, making the wrong choice. And that might be right.

In Israel's history, the prophet Amos had a series of visions. In one, he sees a basket of summer fruit. To which the Lord says to him,

(SLIDE)

"The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will spare them no longer.

A basket of summer fruit looks good but it doesn't last long. Its symbolic of the end of the season. But how would people's hunger be satisfied being the summer?

The Lord tells Amos,

(SLIDE)

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land,
not a famine of bread or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord.

Hearing the words of the Lord matters. Its the better part that Jesus commends as Mary sits to listen to the word of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord was there embodied in their midst. How could one not sit and listen?

But not everyone did, did they? Jesus came but many rejected him or refused to listen. That response continues today, and I suspect always will, until the end. For some, the famine will continue.

(SLIDE)

Until they come to the one who said, "I am the Bread of Life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry" (John 6:35).

Can we hear that Word? We must. Because that is where we hear the words of eternal life, the words which tell us we are loved, precious, valued, with a purpose to do good in this world.

But Martha.

I want to suggest that the Martha Complex is to be so worried, anxious or distracted that we miss hearing the word we're meant to hear.

The Martha Complex, something we might all experience at times, means that we just might miss the life affirming, life giving, liberating message that is food for our souls.

Because we're probably not going to hear it amidst whatever noise is distracting us or overwhelming us with worry and anxiety.

(SLIDE)

The Greek Bible uses two words for worried and distracted. They are *merimnao*, which means pulled apart, divided into parts or to go to pieces; and *thoroobeo*, which means disturbed with panic, agitated in the mind and noisy disorder.

And the word Jesus uses, translated into the Greek as Mary's better part, suggests a portion that no one can take away once given. *Merida* is an assigned portion which is there to be chosen.

In the Christian life, the Way of Jesus, each moment calls for a choice. We can choose to remain in worry, anxiety and distraction or we can help one another to choose a better portion, avoid the famine and never go hungry.

I say we can help each other choose because its often hard to be left alone to be expected to make the choice. Sometimes life is too difficult that we need the faith of others to get us through whatever trauma we're rightly anxious or distracted about. I don't want to suggest that whatever worry or anxiety you're facing that it can simply be ignored and all you need to do is listen to the Bible. That's a bit like saying to a depressed person, they just need to pray a bit harder.

Churches might not have always been good at this. Followers of Jesus are meant to embody God's way of being in the world but instead have often displayed more of a Martha Complex.

As one theologian has written recently,

"... we were supposed to live inside of an alternative society, almost a utopia, and from such fullness "go to the world." Instead, we created a model whereby people live almost entirely in the world, fully invested in its attitudes toward money, war, power, and gender—and sometimes "go to church." Most of us end up thinking and operating pretty much like our surrounding culture.

Many people, however, now find this solidarity in think tanks, support groups, prayer groups, study groups, house-building projects, healing circles, or

community-focused organisations. Perhaps without fully recognising it, we are often heading in the right direction. Some new studies indicate that Christians are not as much leaving Christianity as they are realigning with groups that live Christian values in the world—instead of just gathering again to hear the readings, recite the creed, and sing songs on Sunday. Jesus does not need our singing; we need instead to act like a community. Actual Christian behaviour might just be growing more than we realise. Behaviour has a very different emphasis than belonging.”
(Richard Rohr)

I see this locally, for example, in Reuse and Thrive. So many people in our community are keen to embody good values and behaviour which are nothing less than Christian in character. Such a community social enterprise appeals to people’s sense of fairness and justice in the world.

I think especially, we’ve lost a lot of young people in the church, only to find them engaged in doing good in other ways “out there”.

I want to end on a positive note for the Marthas among us. If you search for the word Martha in the Bible you might find that her name appears some 12 times or so. From these verses we can see Jesus loved both Martha and Mary; Martha is often named before Mary and sometimes their home is described as Martha’s home. The first verse of today’s reading from Luke 10 says that,

(Jesus) entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him.

I like to think she’d made a good, nurturing home where people, like Jesus were welcomed with warm hospitality.

The world needs Marthas. The world needs safe, warm, nurturing, welcoming homes.

Becca Stevens is an Episcopal priest who, growing up, saw the importance of a safe nurturing home.

“My mother’s example of showing love through practical means gave me the wherewithal to open a home for women survivors of trafficking, prostitution, and addiction more than twenty-five years ago in Nashville, Tennessee. It was a small house for five women. I said: “Come live free for two years with no authority living with you. Live free.” . . . I figured that’s what I would want if I were coming in off the streets or out of prison. . . . I did it because sanctuary is the most practical ideal of all.”

Her small home has grown, like a mustard seed, into a growing global movement where thousands of women are discovering the freedom and safety of a nurturing home.

And underscoring what is behind all of this, Becca Stevens says,

(SLIDE)

“Sometimes what we need most is to remind one another of how the divine is all around us, calling us to see and taste it for ourselves.”

(Becca Stevens, *Practically Divine*, 2021).

In Christ, we are both Martha and Mary, called to listen and to welcome with divine hospitality. May we embody such practise here in KNEC and beyond.