

2025 TALK – LENT 4, PSALM 65, LUKE 10:38-42

FINDING REST IN GATHERED WORSHIP

I'm going to say something shocking to begin with today... Listen to this... Sometimes Sunday mornings can be the most stressful time of our week. Now that will not be a shock to some of us. It's true isn't it? Some of us have so many jobs to do, so many people to give messages to, that we end up chasing out tails on Sunday mornings. Is this really the way Sunday morning should be?

The comedian Milton Jones is a Christian who knows about the experience of church. Here's one of his jokes: "Some people see the church as a giant helicopter. They're scared to get too close in case they get sucked into the rotas." ... We too should see church as a giant helicopter. An air-sea rescue type of helicopter. But keeping one of those big beasts serviced, full of petrol and equipped with a fully-trained crew does take *a lot of work...*

The story of Martha & Mary is helpful here. Although I have to add some qualifications... Like many stories of Jesus, it is problematic. More than that, choosing this story for Mothering Sunday is perhaps not the best fit... Mothers of young children are often the busiest of people. Like Martha, they too are rightly 'worried & upset about many things'. I am conscious that one time when I preached on this story before, I had an angry mum to answer to at the end of the service... The story of Martha & Mary is not meant to make people guilty for caring & for being actively responsible for others...

But I would like us to at least notice three things from this story. There are many more things to notice about this simple, domestic tale. But these are the things I want to draw our attention to this morning.

The first thing to notice is this. Jesus was in the neighbourhood. So Martha invites him to her home. Just to remember the Psalm we heard earlier. This is the reverse of the situation in Psalm 65... Here it's not *us* on *God's* doorstep. Here *God* is on *our* doorstep. How would this make you feel? If God was on your doorstep?... Also, a different situation to the Holman Hunt painting of Jesus knocking on our door. He is not knocking, because you have already invited him in. What are you not wanting Jesus to see? You are, like anyone, going to do your utmost to make Jesus' stay as comfortable & pleasant as possible. We all tend to be a bit house proud don't we, I guess?. How much

more are we going to want to do, with Jesus as our guest? We'll bring out the finest bone china with a flourish won't we? (That's if we have bone china...!).

It's interesting. This simple dwelling is described as **Martha's home**, not **Martha & Mary's** home. So Martha clearly felt responsible for how this visit was going to go. There are some similarities for me. When the Lord Lieutenant of Herts comes to Carey to visit H.Club in June, I'm the one who is supposed to greet him... Just the thought is already giving me the heeby-jeebies... !

But I digress. Martha felt that lots of things needed doing. There were lots of preparations she felt had to be made for Jesus' visit to be a success. We can all understand the pressure she felt. How busy she must have been. OK. But Mary... Mary shared the same home as her sister. But she did not feel the same need to help with all these preparations... It's a bit like many wives complaining about their husbands, who don't tend to see all the jobs that need doing at home. (I know I've been guilty of this at times... Just as well Chris is with Children's Church right now, or we might get a long list of examples...)!

The 2nd thing to notice. Martha gets 'distracted'. She is dotting from one thing to another. Pulled this way & that. And she quickly gets annoyed at her sister. Just as quickly as she has been overwhelmed with all the jobs that need doing, she also quickly gets overwhelmed by **all the feelings**. Jealousy that her sister has found the prime location in the house, before everything has been sorted... Righteous indignation that her sister isn't helping her with these much-needed jobs. **And** Martha ends up feeling angry at Jesus for being blind to this obvious injustice. She echoes the words of the disciples in the boat during the storm: 'Jesus don't you care...?'. (x2) Four words. Fancy saying this to Jesus...! But I'm sure, like me, you have found yourself saying this, or thinking this at times.

The 3rd thing to notice. Jesus lovingly speaks Martha's name – twice. Compare this to his personal address to Mary in the Easter garden, when he uses her name just once, to bring her to herself. Here, Jesus feels he needs to speak Martha's name twice, to re-call her to her true self. His next words to her - I'm sure Jesus has spoken to all of us these same words : 'You are worried and upset about many things'... (x2) Then Jesus brings Martha's focus back to her love for Jesus & her love for her sister. Jesus doesn't try to 'placate' Martha. Instead he simply reminds Martha about what is of first importance... He goes

on: '... few things are needed here, or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken from her...'.

That's the punch-line to our story, but like many of the stories (& also the parables of Jesus) it is unfinished. Deliberately left open-ended. Let's try to scroll forward from this moment shall we?

We have 3 alternative ways of finishing this story. Not mutually exclusive...

First ending is this (to my mind the least likely): Martha continues to do the jobs she feels need doing, but quite loudly in the background, to make clear that she still feels resentful towards her sister & angry at Jesus... Now I can't imagine this happening. It might have taken some moments for Martha to compose herself & calm down. But I don't imagine that Jesus would have wanted those resentments to keep simmering in Martha's heart & mind.

The second ending is this (also to my mind, unlikely): Martha continues with those important jobs, but she is helped now by some of the other disciples... I'm sure others would have been willing to help, but this would have made Mary feel more awkward than she already did, in her own home...

The third ending is this (and I'm sure most likely): Martha decides to put down her spatula & takes off her apron. She puts aside for a time whatever she thought of as most important. And instead, she joins her sister, Mary, in sitting at the feet of Jesus. This after all (in the words of the Message Bible) is 'the main course'... To listen to the words of Jesus. Because 'no-one can live on bread alone, but rather on every word that comes from the mouth of God'...

This very real story is similar to the one dreamed up by Jesus: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. What happens with the elder brother? Is he left fuming outside the family home?... Or does he eventually come round to seeing that all the work he has done is nothing compared to the work God has done of bringing his lost brother home.

Which brings me to one or two general points about our church worship. The Greek word 'liturgy' has its roots in the word 'work'. But the familiar idea of our work gets turned on its head, when it comes to worship. Because worship is, first and foremost, God's work... 'This is love, not that we loved God, but that God first loved us & gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin'...

With Martha & Mary, with the 'two prodigal brothers' the question is 'what happens next?'. So with our worship, the question is: 'What happens now?'. But it isn't true that worship is first thinking of what God has done & then thinking of what we will do. This would be to make our work separate from God's work. No, it's not at all like that. The question is: 'how does God want to **continue His** work in us...?' (Or perhaps I should say on this Mothering Sunday: 'How does our Heavenly Mother want to continue **Her** work in us today?'. Equally true... The Bible is very clear – God is both male & female).

But once again, I digress. Before I finish, let me read to you something of the story of a church in Luton. A church which tends to avoid drawing up rotas. This is the story of St Luke's, Leagrave, & what emerged after the church came out of the lockdowns of the Covid pandemic. Let me read to you from this account, written by Sara & Sam Hargreaves of Engage Worship, from the book, 'The Rest is Worship':

(READ paras from p.158 & p.161)...

There are things we can learn from Luton, after all...!

Here's the bottom line, if you like. We all have various, often different, expectations of worship & of church. And this is not just about the types of songs we enjoy singing... We carry a whole range of expectations about what church should be & look like. What church should provide for us. But as Jesus said about Martha & Mary: '**only one thing is needed**'. (x2) Carey BC is here, first & last to enable people to spend time with Jesus... What else matters ?

Sometimes its right for us to serve others. Sometimes its right for others to serve us. As the hymn puts it: 'We are pilgrims on a journey & companions on the road... let me have the grace to let you be my servant too...'. But, at the end of the day, we need to let Jesus work on us, to minister to us. Just as he did at the Last Supper, when he washed the feet of each disciple... even Judas.

I would like us to finish this unfinished talk with silence. Silence is God's chosen way to end every sermon... A time for us to sit at the feet of Jesus – like Mary (**and** Martha). I hope you have each got a sheet with the words of Jesus, from Matthew 11, with which we opened this Lent series, 4 weeks ago. Just before we seek God in the quiet, let me say that if anyone would like someone to pray with them, there are people here, happy to pray with you at the end of the service. There may be things which God puts his finger on during the quiet...

(Try not to worry if people are visibly upset during this time. It shouldn't surprise us. As Jesus said: 'you are worried & upset about many things'...).

Listen now to God's word about God's people entering God's rest.

READ: **Hebrews 4:6-16** (OR 5 words: 'only one thing is needed'...).

TIME OF QUIET ... HYMN - LORD MAY OUR RESTING