**Luke 10:38-42**

**Mary and Martha**

This morning, we say two ‘hello’s’ and one ‘goodbye’.

We say ‘hello’ and welcome to our friends from Berlin, and we are thankful for the link that our two churches have together and the way in which we are able to share our lives and our faith together. It is lovely to have you with us this weekend.

Secondly, we say ‘hello’ to David Andrew’s as tomorrow he begins his new role as full-time Parish Assistant at St. Andrew’s. As you know, David is an integral part of our church family, and we are blessed to have him with us and we pray fro David as he begins a journey of exploration to see whether or not the priesthood may be the right thing for his life. And as David goes through that process, he will spend at least two years with us as Parish Assistant: taking on verging and caretaking roles, shadowing me and Lizzie in our ordained ministries, attending church meetings, undertaking pastoral visits, doing Home Communions and occasionally leading our worship. Please pray for David as he seeks God’s will for his future.

But today, we also say a ‘Goodbye’ to Vince Stokes who has served as our Verger-Caretaker here for 8 years. Verging is in Vince’s DNA: he has been a Verger for his whole working life, Vince’s father was a Verger, Vince’s son is a Verger. And I want to say this morning what a wonderful Verger Vince has been.

The role of Verger is a hidden one; a quiet one that goes unnoticed by most. In fact, if you are not hidden as a Verger, you are probably not doing the job right! A good Verger is one that is rarely noticed because the whole point of Verging is to be a servant of the worshipping community, quietly making sure that every aspect of the worship service goes smoothly without any form of distraction at all.

That goes for the most obvious aspects of worship, like making sure the hymn books are out and the liturgy sheets are available and that we have enough bread and wine for Communion and so on. But Verging also works on a far more subtle level too…

Every priest, every Bishop, leads worship differently - and we all have our own way of doing things during the service and how we want people to stand and where we should stand and different items to use and so on…And a really good Verger is able to almost read the mind of a priest or a Bishop and anticipate how they want things to be so that, when they are leading, everything is exactly how it should be for them.

Verging, more than anything, is a highly intuitive role and Vince is one of the most intuitive Vergers I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Like any good Verger, he is able to put aside his personal preferences for worship and fully serve the priest or Bishop, and the local church community by fulfilling the wishes and desires and theological persuasions of those he is serving.

St. Andrew’s has been enriched by Vince’s servant ministry and we will be sorry to see him leave us. Vince has a deep faith in God that encompasses both personal spirituality and the ability to serve the community.

And so, as we give thanks today for Vince’s ministry, I think it is good for us to reflect on this story from the Gospel reading about Jesus’ response to Mary and Martha.

This is one of the strangest stories in the Gospel! What on earth is going on here? Let’s review the course of events:

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops off to visit Mary and Martha at home. Now we know from John’s Gospel and the story of the raising of Lazarus that Mary and Martha were a couple of Jesus’ closest friends and that they lived in Bethany, which is just a couple of miles away from Jerusalem. They were Lazarus’ sisters.

And so Jesus arrives at their home. Presumably he hasn’t seen them for a while and he suddenly shows up with his twelve disciples and he is welcomed into their home by Martha who begins to cook dinner for them.

Now, many of us like to show hospitality to other people, perhaps having them round for dinner. But to suddenly have 13 people turn up at the door one evening might give a serious challenge to the most hospitable of us, right? But Martha is not phased by this: she has a real gift of hospitality, so she brings them inside and gets on with the business of cooking for them all.

And whilst she beavers away in the kitchen, her sister, Mary, chooses not to help her out! Instead, she sits down at Jesus’ feet and listens quietly whilst he is teaching.

Well, after a while, Martha gets indignant about this and rather than pulling Mary to one side to tear her off a strip privately, she goes into the room where Jesus and Mary and the disciples are and she has a go at Jesus! “Lord, don’t you care that Mary has left me to do all the work by myself? Can’t you tell her to get up and give a hand with all this cooking?”

So what should Jesus have done? He was caught in an embarrassing situation. Here he was, trying to teach his disciples – and Mary – about the ways of God before enjoying a nice relaxing meal. But now he is caught up in a tiff between two sisters. How would he deal with it? Whose side would he take?

Well, to the surprise of many people throughout the centuries since and, no doubt to the surprise of Martha on that night, Jesus takes Mary’s side: "Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Now, to be honest, this seems like a surprising response by Jesus. Why does Jesus praise Mary – who seems to be doing nothing – over and above Martha who is simply trying to be a good host? It doesn’t seem to make sense…surely Martha has done nothing wrong!

Well, there have been different interpretations of Jesus’ response through the centuries…

Some have suggested that Luke had a problem with women in leadership and actually what he is doing is suggesting that Jesus criticised Martha for her activity and her pro-activity in taking a lead in this situation and praises Mary for staying passive and silent. But that doesn’t seem very likely particularly because, of all the Gospel writers, Luke is the most pro-woman. It is in Luke’s Gospel that we meet so many influential women of faith: Anna, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the women at the tomb, the persistent widow and so on…And anyway, having Mary sitting equally with the disciples would hardly support the view that women shouldn’t be in a position of Christian leadership! So I don’t think we have an anti-women in leadership agenda running here. Maybe there’s something else going on instead…

But the other common interpretation is just as troublesome in my view. I’m referring to the idea that Jesus is commending contemplation over and above activity: that, if we want to grow spiritually we need to stop Doing and start listening.

Now, that approach frightens me – a lot! Suppose I stand here today and say, “In order to grow spiritually, we need to stop doing and start listening”. What will happen? My Wardens will say, ‘We don’t want to be Wardens anymore - we just want to go to Bible Studies instead!” Philip would say, “No more organ-playing for me! It’s time to pray more!” The PCC would say, “I think we should forget about the business of running the church and turn our meetings into a time of worship instead!” If this is a story in which Jesus is telling the Do-ers to stop Doing, then we won’t have a PCC or a Youth Worker or a Families Chaplain or Sunday Club Leaders or School Governors or a church cleaning rota or a choir or a Finance Advisory Group - or anything else for that matter! We’d just have one, very large prayer meeting instead!!

The truth is, of course, that there is a balance we need to strike between doing and listening. But, in getting that balance right, we mustn’t undervalue the importance of doing! The Christian faith is not primarily abstract or philosophical or conceptual. The Christian faith is not primarily a set of ideas to be believed. The Christian faith is, first and foremost, a relationship to be enjoyed and out of that, a lifestyle to be lived. The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us full of grace and truth. Isn’t that what we read in John’s Gospel? So the Word had to do something: become flesh and dwelt amongst us so that we could experience grace and truth. In that one statement from John’s Gospel, we come face to face with the Doing God - not some far off distant deity who stays aloof from our world, lost in a conceptual world of thoughts and ideas.

Balance between Doing and Listening is crucial to our spirituality. So surely Jesus is not criticising Martha for ‘doing’. So what on earth is going on here?

Well, I think the key to this passage is Jesus’ comment to Martha: “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her”. A seemingly innocuous comment - and the traditional interpretation is that Jesus is somehow scolding Martha for choosing wrongly. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on at all…

Actually, I think Jesus has a twinkle in his eye at this point and he’s making a gentle joke to help Martha understand what’s really happening in her front room! Let me explain…

Martha has been out in the kitchen. She’s making the food and dishing up the dinner for 13 unexpected guests, and Jesus says to her, “Mary has chosen the better part…”

But actually, that isn’t exactly what he says. If we go back to the Greek, what Jesus actually says is this: “Mary has chosen the better portion…” And the word ‘portion’ is the same word that is used for a portion of food. So I think what Jesus is saying is this: “Martha, you are out in the kitchen worrying about portions of food. But the portion of food Mary is digesting in here is much more important!”

He’s not scolding Martha. He’s not saying that she is making the wrong choice by being busy. Instead, Jesus, with a twinkle in his eye, is comparing the relative value of bread for the stomach with bread for the soul! “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry”.

This is not a story about the relative value of Doing versus Listening. This is not a story about the relative value of Activity versus Contemplation. This is a story in which Jesus point out that his teaching, the Word of God to us, is food for the soul that will bring us eternal and the hope of salvation.

And so we are confronted by Jesus in this passage, not in a scolding fashion, but with a twinkle in his eye, as he says to each one of us: “Do you want to spend your life preparing food? Or do you want to have your life prepared by spiritual food – the bread of life?” “What do you value?”

And of course Mary is the example to us. She has chosen the better portion because she was feeding on the bread of life and wasn’t really interested in the bread and olives in the kitchen! And as Jesus says, “That will not be taken away from her”. And that, of course, is the ultimate truth of this passage: that if we feed on the bread of life, we shall be blessed with an eternal relationship of bliss with God that will never be taken away from us.

Jesus says in John 10:10 that he has come so we may have life in all its fullness. We are to follow the example of Mary not by always choosing contemplation over activity, but by always choosing to feed on the bread of life, which is the Word of God revealed to us in Jesus.

And as we do that, we want to say ‘thank you’ to God for our Berlin visitors today who, through their own mission and ministry, are leading the people of their city towards Jesus on a weekly basis through their witness.

We want to say ‘thank you’ to God for bringing David Andrews to us. And we commit to supporting and encouraging him as he discerns the future of his life and tries to work out what the balance should look like between Contemplation and Activity.

And we want to say ‘thank you’ to God for Vince and his ministry amongst us over the years. And we wish him every blessing for the years to come with Joan in his retirement.

And for ourselves, we prepare to come to the Eucharist now in the spirit of Mary to feed on the bread of life to the eternal benefit of our bodies and souls. In Isaiah 55, God says, “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.” In this moment, in this church, at this altar rail, the bread of life comes to us and meets with us. Choose the better portion. It will not be taken away from you. And you will know what it is to have life in all its fullness. Amen.