

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	20 July 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

If you enjoy asking people round for meals at your house, you will know that the process can sometimes get fraught. There are always many different things that you have to think about like laying the table, sorting out drinks, getting timings right for when things will be ready. It is easy to become fraught with those around you. My own particular point of irritability is when people coming and talk to me in the kitchen while I am concentrating on trying to get the food ready. So much so that members of my family have kindly had an apron made for me which says on the front 'do keep me company while I cook'.

If that ever happens to you, then you may sympathise with Martha, one of the two sisters in today's gospel reading who welcome Jesus to their house in Bethany. She has been bustling about getting the supper ready, whilst her sister Mary has spent the time sitting at Jesus's feet and listening to his words. 'Tell Martha to pull her finger out', is essentially Martha's message to Jesus, in a more or less accurate rendering of the Greek text. But Jesus reproves her: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'. With those words, Jesus commends Mary for what she has done; for sitting at his feet and listening to his words. It is interesting as an aside that, whereas in the ancient world a learned teacher would have instructed only male students, here we see Jesus instructing a female student.

What was it that so captivated Mary that she forgot about the household chores? Perhaps she was fascinated by Jesus' summary of the Jewish law that crystallises its meaning in the love of God and neighbour. Perhaps she was receiving spiritual guidance about how to pray. Perhaps she was hearing his

stories about the prodigal son, the good Samaritan or the rich man and Lazarus, and had become completely absorbed in them. But whatever it was that Mary was listening to, she expects that the words of Jesus are going to be living words for her and that in them she will find new life and a new purpose.

What Mary does is something that we also can hope to do: to find that the words of Jesus will be living words for us. Where do we listen to his words? Well, to give an obvious suggestion: the Eucharist is permeated with Jesus's words. They come normally in the reading of the gospel but also at other points during the service; for example, when we pray the Lord's Prayer or when the Eucharistic Prayer is said over the offering of bread and wine. And, as we hear those words, can we, like Mary, allow them to permeate us and absorb us, so that we can be shaped by them, and find in them new life and a new purpose. Some centuries earlier, the prophet Jeremiah described in characteristically startling terms something like what she does: 'Your words were found and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart'.

But although the Eucharist on Sunday does expose us to the life-giving words of Jesus, it is always good to find further opportunities for this. Some people may use the readings sheet from Sunday, and look at the readings further during the week: I hope you might consider doing that. Others may use the notes provided by the Scripture Union or some other commentary to find your way through a book of the Bible. Here at the Cathedral, we have our Bible fellowship and, I would hope, increasing opportunities in the future for biblical study. So there are opportunities for all of us to be inspired by Mary to make listening to the words of Jesus a priority.

Looking at the story further, from the earliest days of the church, commentators on this passage in Luke's gospel have pointed out the contrast between the two sisters as they are depicted here. They have seen Martha as the active sister, a so-called 'type' or pattern of people who like to bustle about and keep themselves busy. By contrast, Mary is a 'type' of those who are quiet, contemplative, able to sit still, listen and pray. For many people, the story has spoken to them about the difference between living life in a way that is frenetically active – the sort of life that Martha seems to have – and living in a way that is more quiet and contemplative – the life of Mary.

Frenetic activity and non-stop busyness is certainly a feature of life for many people in the western world, and that often spills over into church life. In my previous post, I was given the task a few years ago of reviewing one of the more urban deaneries in East Sussex and this point came home to me. As the review went along, it became clear that all of the churches had very active ministries, with different projects, plans and activities. There were some very worthwhile activities such as food banks, different ingeniously named groups and services, refuges for people in need and so on. All of that was fine and wonderful to see but, in a large town, there was only one of the churches that on a daily basis actually seemed to lay the priority on gathering people for prayer and worship and to listen to the words of the Lord. The result was an all too present danger of busyness, burnout and hyperactivity for clergy and lay people alike, with the churches running on spiritually empty.

Into such situations and into our often frenetic lives, Jesus speaks a word that is both challenging and comforting: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'.

One thing is necessary above all the other priorities that jostle for attention: take time: time to listen, time to rest, time for silence, time simply to behold the beauty and the need that is around you. And above all, time to make room for the words of Jesus to be the centre and focus of your contemplation in the pattern of Mary who 'sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying'. And I like to think that the story indicates even to those of us who lead unavoidably busy lives that if we can do this, God will pour out his grace upon us and, perhaps against our expectations, that sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus and listening to what he is saying will give us the inner resources to face all the other activities and challenges that every day can bring.