



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Genesis 18.1-10a](#), [Colossians 1.15-28](#), [Luke 10.38-end](#)

17 July 2022

I recall hearing the present Archbishop of York describe how on an occasion when beginning a school morning assembly, he talked to the students about the fact that, even in the few hours since they'd woken up, their lives had probably already been filled, not only with the basic tasks of washing, dressing, and having breakfast but also with watching tv, perhaps having a game on the play station, checking social media channels, with all of the feelings and responses that triggers, as well as listening to something on the mobile as they travelled in; in effect, a stuffed full period, and this was just the start of the day. He then went on to suggest that one thing which they could do for a few minutes each day and which would improve their lives, as well as the life of the world around them, would be to sit still, be quite and reflect. Then, he stopped talking, picked up a chair, placed it on the centre of the stage and slowly and carefully sat down upon it and sat still for a minute. As he stood up, there was a huge spontaneous round of applause from the youngsters, one he'd never experienced before after previous assemblies he'd taken. Clearly, the action had struck a chord in them and captured their imagination. At some gut level, they knew that what was being suggested made sense and was, albeit perhaps previously unconsciously, something for which they were longing.

Of course, it doesn't need me to tell you that however hard we may try, it's difficult not to be contaminated with the frenzied roller-coaster of the 24/7 activity culture in which we find ourselves. And of how such a culture makes it harder to be in touch with those parts of ourselves which yearn for some space and silence.

Certainly, it's a pattern of living that doesn't seem to be doing us much good; I'm constantly hearing of poor levels of mental health amongst the student population, as well as in the wider community, a situation exacerbated by the pandemic but certainly not initiated by it. Amidst the mania of our lives, we long for some time and space. And, of course, when we do get a taste of it, we discover that it is from this place that all sorts of creative things can emerge, which is denied us otherwise.

And so to our Gospel, which connects well with our cultural challenges but takes us further. It's a familiar one in which Mary and Martha find themselves in Jesus company; we're told that Martha was caught up in her work whilst Mary sat at her Lord's feet, and in doing so, according to Jesus, chooses the better part.

It's hard not to feel some sympathy for Martha; I'm sure we've all been in situations when there is plenty to do and those around us seem blissfully unaware of this reality. What I think though, Luke, our Gospel writer, is wanting to do here, is not to set up contemplation and action in opposition to each other; after all, this episode comes on the back of the parable of the good Samaritan, so Luke knows all about the importance of active service, and of accepting the demands that our responsibilities bring.

What we have here, in this domestic scene, is something different. We learn that Martha is distracted by her many tasks; she is distracted. I think that paying attention for sustained periods of time is something we find increasingly hard to do when new images and messages are constantly coming across our gaze to attract us, or alternatively to distract us from whatever we were considering at the time, but here in this Gospel, not only has Mary chosen to sit at her Lord's feet & be still, good that that is; she has chosen to give him her attention; she is listening to him.

Taking the time to be still in Christ's presence not only enables her to find a stiller and deeper place within herself and all that is discoverable there. It enables her to touch base with the very heart of life itself. As Paul stresses in the epistle we heard, Christ is the one in whom all things hold together, because in him, the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. Paul offers to us a Christ with cosmic dimensions, central to the whole process both of creation and ongoing creativity but also to our redeeming and the redemption of all things, so there can be no doubt that Mary has chosen the better part; she has placed herself in a position in which she can be touched at the greatest of depths, Christ's words becoming so rooted in her that they will not be taken away.

Two images may help in our reflections on this theme. Both come from the seaside, which feels fitting as we move into the summer holiday season.

Firstly, I don't know if swimming in the sea is your kind of thing; in recent years, I've come to love it, and last month, whilst Teresa and I were having a break on the Suffolk Coast, I plunged into the North Sea. A little bracing at first but once I'd swum a few strokes, my body adjusted to the temperature, and I was able to appreciate the simple pleasure of bobbing about, negotiating the incoming waves.

As I did so, I was very conscious, not only of feeling myself being held and supported by the water in an almost uterine embryonic experience, but also, as the waves came in, of being repeatedly washed, with all of the baptismal associations that go with that experience. In a sense, it felt like a state of prayer in which I was being both held and cleansed by God; on reflection, I wondered, to what extent, there was some parallel with what Mary might have felt as she sat at Jesus' feet and experienced the presence of the one whose creative love had brought her to birth and was upholding and redeeming her life.

Of course, any imaginative comparison between mine & Mary's experience, though, came to a halt as I became conscious of my vulnerability to the sea's tidal movements. I had nothing to anchor me other than my own feet, which would be useless beyond a certain depth. By contrast, Mary herself was being rooted and grounded as she listened to what Jesus was saying in way that it couldn't be taken away from her; his words were shaping who she was, & in so doing giving her greater faith, & a strong anchor. And this led me to consider the second image I want to share, which took me from the east to the n-w coast of England.

Some of you will be familiar with the work of the British sculptor, Antony Gormley. Perhaps best known for his extraordinary cast iron figure, the Angel of the North, set in Gateshead, he's produced a whole range of pieces. And the one that has made the most impact on me is a work called 'Another Place', in which a hundred identical life size human figures, again made of iron, are set within the sands of Crosby beach just north of Liverpool.

The figures are about five hundred metres apart and stretch along the beach for about a mile and half as well as about a mile out to sea, all of them looking towards the distant horizon. As the tide comes in, some of the figures are completely submerged, whilst others are partially covered, but the two metre vertical steel piles attached to the base of their feet and set into the sand, mean that they are held secure against the incoming waves.

We'd timed our visit to coincide with the setting sun which lay behind them and served to create a hugely powerful and emotive canvas. Here was a whole community of figures, outwardly looking to what might lie beyond, yet also rooted and grounded enough to face whatever was coming towards them; be it to receive the blessing of being gently washed and cleansed by the soft ripples of the sea or to weather great storms and gales, and all of the things that lie in between those poles. They were up for it and open to it, and though inevitably, as iron figures, they have rusted over time and gathered increasing populations of barnacles, as, in a sense, we all do as human beings, they maintain their focus and their stability.

Today's Gospel calls us both to know what it is to sit in Christ's presence, being washed and cleansed by God's redeeming love but also to be drawn into it in a way that roots us in that love, enabling us to look beyond ourselves, and engage with the world in all its beauty and its pain; for in so doing, it is to choose the better part, which, like Mary, will not be taken away from us.

The Revd Adam Dickens, Cathedral and University Chaplain.