

*Today's religion*

It is a deceptively simple story. Jesus rolls up at the house of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and they extend hospitality to him, welcoming him into their home. Hospitality, however, is hard work and on this occasion the burden all falls on sister Martha who is 'distracted by her many tasks.'- while sister Mary's sits at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word. Eventually it all gets too much for Martha who blurts out, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?' To which Jesus replies, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better art which will not be taken away from her.' The lesson seems to be obvious. True religion does not consist of endlessly doing stuff. It's not activism. There is also what other translations call 'the one thing needful': the contemplative side of faith, the need to open our lives up to God, to the Spirit of God, to the Word of God – the need to spend time with God be it in public worship or private devotion. So it was that when we admitted new members earlier in the service the promises they made included one 'to be faithful in public and private worship'. That phrase is a recognition that we do not live by bread alone. We are not just animals with physical, biological appetites. We are not just machines with material needs and programmed to work. We are made by God and for God and without attention to that dimension of our lives our humanity is demeaned and diminished. So, on that reading, this passage is a plea for the importance of the devotional life, the life of prayer, the life of spiritual nurture.

On the other hand, of course, we should never set the devotional life over against the life of action, of practice, of service. Christianity is centred upon a God who is active and engaged in the world, taking flesh in Jesus Christ. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir in one of his poems laments the fact that 'the Word that became flesh has become word once again', and if Mary's place at Christ's feet, preoccupied with the word taught, is at the expense of the Word made flesh in action and service then it cannot be commended. Martha's problem is not that she is active, serving, but that she has become 'distracted by her many tasks'. She has become distracted from Jesus. She has become so focused on the pots and the pans and the cooking and the cleaning that she has

lost awareness of the wider context in which all this is set. So engaged is she with her domestic surroundings that she has lost touch with the wider realm which defines her life – God and the rule of God that is embodied in the one who is speaking. This is ‘the one thing needful’ of which Jesus speaks.

Well, so far so good, and this is a fairly obvious and clear take on this passage. It is, however, not quite as simple as that – it never is - and there are many other interpretations that we could run with. So, for example, it is pointed out that Mary’s position here, a woman sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to his teaching, is something that would never usually be found in Jesus’ day. Women did not sit at the feet of rabbis attending to their teaching – that was men’s business. And so in allowing this Jesus is turning the social order upside down and giving women a new place and a new dignity. Other commentators go deeper. They maintain that this story reflects tensions that were being experienced in the life of the early church over the role of women, and while some argue that it is indeed setting women free from inferior status others actually argue the opposite – that this passage reinforces a passive role for women. As a woman Martha has no business being involved in active ministry. Her role is to be passive and receptive, like Mary. Well, such is the richness of Scripture. But this morning I want to stick with the simpler interpretation, that this passage is basically about giving due place to God and to the spiritual life, to prayer and meditation and to feeding on God’s Word.

Why this is so important is that I think we could see in Martha an image of 21<sup>st</sup> century people, ‘distracted by... many tasks’. It seems, does it not, that for many people – at least in the more developed world – busy-ness and activity and doing are making of us all distracted and stressed-out people. I know that is not true for all. For the unemployed, the homeless, the displaced, life is often all too empty but they are all the more marginalised by the fact that the busy life, the frenetic life, the crammed life is held up as some sort of ideal. So we hear somewhat sexist talk of ‘super-mums’, women whose place was once the home but who now manage to have it all – work, family, leisure pursuits, grooming, holidays – all packed tightly into highly organised ‘schedules’. And we hear of parents who drive their children in the pursuit of excellence, determined that they should be high achievers - and we feel for the poor children who may just wish that someone would give them a break. And I recall when computers and information technology first came along people spoke of how it would release more and more leisure time: great horizons of

recreative leisure time would open up - when of course the very opposite has happened, and we are more driven and stressed than ever as the treadmill runs ever faster. The computer revolution, information technology, rather than freeing up more time, has simply upped the output ante. And we find it impossible to put away our phones and our endless, addictive texting – yes, even here in church! And where do we find opportunity to step off the treadmill? Where do we find time and space to breathe? Where do we create opportunity to refresh our souls, to renew our weary spirits, to discover hidden depths in our humanity? In short, where do we find ‘the one thing needful’ of which Jesus speaks?

Well, of course, in previous eras this was religion’s job. On Sundays we laid down the mantle of Martha and became Marys for a while and maybe that kept us sane. But what of now? What of our secular world? Well, I was intrigued the other night to hear on the radio the Welsh singer and broadcaster, Cerys Matthews, rejoicing over her national team’s success in the Euro ’16 football tournament, and observing that sport has now taken over the place once held by religion. And her comment comes in the midst of a Summer when we have enjoyed or endured (depending on your tastes) Euro ’16, followed by Wimbledon tennis (and hurray for Andy Murray!), followed by the Open Golf Championship, and with the Olympics still to come. And maybe sport has indeed become religion for the masses in a secular age – one thing that brings people together, one thing that arouses their passions and their loyalties, one thing that can add a different dimension to a world that has become fraught and frantic.

Certainly the connections between sport and religion are fascinating. The Olympic games themselves were originally devised as a five day festival which honoured the Greek god Zeus through sports, sacrifices and hymns. Athletes believed that their training honoured the gods and that victory was a sign of divine favour, so religion and sport were closely interwoven and connected. Well, that of course is long since gone but when the Olympics were revived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was with quasi-religious rituals and with high aspirations of symbolising the unity of the human race. And in recent times great football clubs like Glasgow Celtic and Liverpool FC were founded as Church initiatives, sport being seen as good for the soul and for moral formation as well as beneficial for the body. And I’m struck by the number of footballers who cross themselves when they run onto the pitch, and this

practice that we observe of victorious athletes of all kinds raising their arms and gazing upwards, their fingers pointed to the heavens. And at the last Olympic games there was that moment in the opening ceremony when the singer Emeli Sandé gave a heartfelt rendering of the hymn ‘Abide with me’, and supporters of Liverpool Football Club have for years adopted as their anthem the song ‘You’ll never walk alone’ with its religious overtones. And it’s been observed that the American Superbowl, held each year on the Lord’s day, is freighted with religious myth and symbolism, with the athletes portrayed as demigods. Here is some weird fusion of religion and sport for a post-Christian culture where traditional religion is passé. And it leaves me wondering if today we find Mary no longer attentive at Jesus’ feet, but rather sitting on the settee watching insanely paid sports stars strut their stuff. Maybe this is where today’s Marathas, stressed and harassed by pressure at work and the strains of life and the relentless demands of the internet and social media and Facebook and Twitter, seek some kind of rest for their weary souls.

So is this where the abandonment of faith brings us? Is this really ‘the one thing needful’? Sport – sport which of course has become one more massive commercial enterprise, in hock to the big multinational conglomerates and the big sponsors, in hock to mammon? As a sports fan who is loving this Summer of tournaments and championships and who will be glued to the TV tonight to watch the closing stages of the British Open Golf Championship, my heart groans – please God, may we have been made for more than this! Please God, may it be true that we do not live by Nike alone! Please God may our spirits have been made for more exalted things!

One of the most helpful descriptions of worship that I have come across is ‘a right royal waste of time’. Worship is a royal activity because it is directed at the Creator of the Universe and his anointed, the one through whom and for whom all things have been created and in whom all things hold together, in the words of our reading from Colossians. But worship is also a glorious waste of time. It has no output, it has no product, nothing that can be measured in terms of profit and loss or on a balance sheet. It is not an efficient or productive use of our time. Instead it is an occasion when we take time to return to our source and our goal, when we recognise that life ultimately consists not in doing but in being, being with the one who loves us and gives us life – the one thing needful. With Martha we need to learn that unless our lives are rooted there, everything else is little more than a distraction. Amen.

O gracious and loving God,  
Creator, Saviour, Redeemer,  
we gather here this morning to worship you.  
We take time here to slow down,  
to take time out, to leave behind pressing and urgent tasks,  
to cease clock-watching  
and to offer you praise and worship.  
O God, our lives are in your hands,  
and our times are in your hands,  
and our hearts are restless and distracted  
until they find their rest in you.  
So we come to meet you here, to be with you here,

to worship and to pray and to hear your Word.  
O God, forgive us that we live distracted lives,  
distracted from you, eternal source and goal of all things.  
O God forgive us that in our busy-ness and our  
ceaseless doing and striving  
we miss out on the one thing needful.  
Come, Lord, and forgive us  
Come, Lord, and set us free from our captivity to lesser things,  
and refocus our lives on you.  
Help us we pray to love and to serve you and;  
to do as you have commanded,  
but help us in so doing to draw strength from you  
as we draw from the wells of your Word and your Spirit.  
We pray all these things in Jesus' name and in his words  
we pray together, saying...