

Luke 10: 38 - 42 Colossians 1: 15-28 Genesis 18: 1-10a

How good are you at dividing up your time and establishing priorities among things which matter to you? The story is told of a young child trying to attract the attention of his father, who is filling in his Tax Returns; then he turns to his mother, who's busy preparing lunch. Both tell him to go and play as they're busy. Eventually, the young lad goes out into the garden - still wondering if anyone is going to look at the overflowing washing machine !!

At an international level, back in 1955, Rosa Parks knew her priorities when ordered to move from the 'whites only' seats to the area reserved for 'coloreds' on the local bus. When she refused to do so, it took great courage - and she could not have known the significant role her action would play in the post-war Civil Rights movement.

In the ancient world of Christ's earthly mission, segregation was an everyday reality. Not only was there a strong divide between the public and private spheres, but private dwellings were also distinctly compartmentalised. Houses were built around a central courtyard which was open to the street, and people could simply walk in.

This area was traditionally designated for male members of the household - and for guests. Unlike today's houses, in which family members move freely from room to room, at that time there were private and secluded areas for women and for slaves. With this division of people went the division of roles. Largely hidden from public view, women and slaves were traditionally associated with serving -while men could expect to be served.

In today's gospel reading from Luke, the story of Martha and Mary is often interpreted as a reminder that, in Christ, we are saved by faith - represented by Mary, who sits at the feet of Jesus- and not by works- represented by Martha, rushing around being busy ! Alternatively, the story is sometimes thought to affirm the importance of contemplation over activity..

Mary, is not serving the guests alongside her sister, but defying cultural traditions by sitting at the feet of Jesus in the public area. Given the traditions of the time, its a startling picture - and Martha is very uncomfortable with her sister's chosen role. With a male guest in the home, Martha feels Mary's rightful place was in the hidden parts of the house - in the kitchen perhaps, and Martha pleads to Jesus to tell Mary to give her a hand.

In his response to the sisters, Jesus overturns the traditional divides. He recognises Martha's concern, but affirms that Mary is right to stay where she is - here, in the public, masculine area of the house, sitting at his feet. There is a time for activity and a time for reflection and learning. In other words, we do need to reflect on how we separate out our activities and our use of time.

This passage speaks powerfully about the nature of the Church. When the early Church met in believers' homes, it was in the central, public, space that it gathered. That early Church was considered by outsiders to be a revolutionary community, defiantly drawing people together, in contrast to a world which preferred to keep them well apart. Anyone who wished to join the group was welcomed.

Today's scripture reminds us that Christian belief is not simply a matter of private, personal spirituality -to be hidden away in a corner- but is to be lived out in all contexts of our lives. God's inclusive love is a very public matter, something made visible for all to see. In a world of great divides, threatened by fears and hatreds of all kinds, we have good news to proclaim.

But, of course, what we tell others about has to be a *lived reality*. We cannot proclaim the inclusive nature of the gospel, while living comfortably with division or injustice. If divisions are to be overcome, we will need to recognise the fears we carry in our own hearts, and the injustices we perpetuate in our traditions and structures- owning up to them humbly and honestly. Above all, we need to talk to and listen to our Lord through regular prayer.

Before Covid precautions brought enforced segregation,, many Churches were hyperactive; involved in all sorts of activities, but spending little time together in prayer. Now, as we, in All Saints Vendée begin to enjoy more fellowship, let's remember that, while God wants us to celebrate Christian living together, its not mega activity he wants from us; its our love and that of the people with whom we are in contact.

Do we make a point of talking with newcomers to services or leave it to someone else to do so? We can miss building, or healing, relationships if we are too busy, or too anxious about the future to share our good news with them.

Remember the words of that traditional hymn:

*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

We, too, need to sit at Jesus's feet, listening attentively and learning from him new ways of relating to each other. In talking with him, we will find the quiet strength, which Christ offers us, to do what we know is right rather than to take the soft option. Its because our sympathies probably tend to lie with Martha, that we need to learn more from Mary.