

Some 4th century wisdom from the desert:

A certain brother came to Abbot Silvanus at Mount Sinai, and seeing the hermits at work he exclaimed: Why do you work for the bread that perisheth? Mary has chosen the best part, namely to sit at the feet of the Lord without working. Then the Abbot said to the disciple Zachary: Give the brother a book and let him read, and put him in an empty cell. At the ninth hour the brother who was reading began to look out to see if the Abbot was not going to call him to dinner, and sometime after the ninth hour he went himself to the Abbot and said: Did the brethren not eat today, Father? Oh yes, certainly, said the Abbot, they just had dinner. Well, said the brother, why did you not call me? You are a spiritual man, said the elder, you don't need this food that perisheth. We have to work, but you have chosen the best part. You read all day, and can get along without food. Hearing this, the brother said: Forgive me, Father. And the elder said: Martha is necessary to Mary, for it was because Martha worked that Mary was able to be praised.

There is a delicate tension and balance with the themes of Contemplation and Action, or Prayer and Service, or Faith and Works, in the Christian life. The biblical tradition reveals a very close relationship between work and prayer. Indeed, the Benedictine motto is *Ora et Labora*: Pray and Work. The two have a common origin in God, and as people spend their efforts in the two fields, prayer and work, they find that they influence each other, giving strength and purpose to life. Prayer that is out of touch with work, too 'heavenly minded to be of no earthly good', needs to be more grounded. Likewise, work that is out of touch with prayer may be misguided without a focus or centre.

The Gospel scene we have before us today (Luke 10.38-42) is beautifully human and quite idyllic. Martha is so concerned about getting a meal prepared that she becomes quite preoccupied - 'distracted'. Mary is absorbed with the teaching and presence of Jesus and simply sits at his feet. Both of them in this situation have been identified with many things, none of which can be proved from these few verses. Martha has been described as the extravert, the activist, the 'do-er'. Mary, as the introvert, the contemplative, the 'be-er'. In this scene each is, no doubt, being simply herself. It is important to note that Jesus does not criticise Martha's serving. Jesus observes Martha's *distraction*, and exposes it to her: he gently quizzes her about a side of her character which needs to be seen in relation to life as a whole, where great issues often do reveal themselves in little events. Martha at this point is not 'at one' with the situation. She is not 'cool' to use a word my daughter uses. It seems that Mary, while no doubt absorbed, is not distracted, and is 'at one'. The 'better part' or 'good portion' to use another translation, is the recognition of Christ in the midst of any occupation, be it prayer or service. The medieval mystic, Teresa of Avila, observed, "The Lord is amongst the saucepans". Contemplation and Action are not walled-off compartments of life, rather they are given a united spirituality in Christ. Without Christ, prayers may be empty, and actions misguided.

Belief in the real Jesus Christ, faith and prayer, and eternal life, go hand in hand with a radical concern for the world in which we live. It is the world, not the church, that God so loved; it is the world for which Jesus died; it is the world for which the believing Christian must live and be sent as Jesus was sent. To grow in an understanding of eternal life is to grow in a Christ-like compassion and hunger for those who do not know eternal life; those who do not have justice, peace, fulfilment, achievement, truth in the world that *they* experience. It is to be 'doers of the Word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1.22) For too long, the statement "You should not mix politics with religion" has been defended on all kinds of pious grounds. Doctor Peter Carnley, once Archbishop of Perth and Primate of Australia, wrote these words, *Christians ought to think pious thoughts, pray without ceasing...smile benignly...and earnestly coax other people to 'get to know Jesus'. They must not roll up their sleeves or dirty their hands by becoming involved in social issues...The Gospel is apparently to be understood as good news to individuals in-so-far as it calls on them to amend their individual lives; but it has little to do with issues of justice and peace, or with the transformation of the corrupt instruments of human diminishment in this world: poverty, exploitation and oppression. Such a view of the Gospel is not only inadequate; I have my doubts whether it qualifies as a Christian view at all, for certainly something very like it has been condemned as an aberration of the faith of the Church.*

So, with the Gospel in our hearts we have to live the Gospel *with our lives*. Anthony DeMello tells a parable "The Explorer". In it, a person leaves his village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his experiences...the incredible beauty, the thundering waterfalls, exotic foliage, amazing wildlife. But the explorer is at loss to evoke the feelings that flooded his heart. He tells them that they simply must go to the Amazon themselves and to help them he draws a map. Immediately the villagers pounce on the map, they copy it so that everyone has their own copy. They frame the map for their homes and town hall. Regularly they study it, discuss it often, until they consider themselves experts on the Amazon, for they know the location of every rapid and waterfall, every turn and bend. They are blissfully unaware of the futility in studying maps as they remain armchair explorers.

It is one thing for a church community to know their scriptures, enjoy their worship and fellowship. It is quite another to live and breathe the Word and bear that living Word in loving kindness with justice to the world. I believe our church community at All Souls' is an 'oasis' in the bustling city desert where the seed of God's Word has found a place to abide awhile, be watered and held fast in humble hearts. Here is our Bethany where very different people can find rest for their souls, meaning, acceptance, a true sense of belonging and, having found such, may then respond with care, love and compassion to this world's needs. May true prayer, authentic love and patient service bear much fruit on this sacred ground. Thanks be to God for Mary and Martha of Bethany. Along with them we get to celebrate their brother, Lazarus, next week! Amen.