

St Andrew's on The Terrace Pentecost 7 Sunday 28 July 2019 Martha and Mary and Myth

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Amos 8:4-8

4 Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, 5 saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, 6 buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. 7 The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done. 8 "Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt.

Gospel

At the Home of Martha and Mary

Luke 10:38-42

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Contemporary Reading

'A Cup of Tea'

from the Zen Tales Collection

NAN-IN, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the cup overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Reflection for the Gathering

Year ago, about 33 years ago, when I was a very new spiritual director, a woman came to me as a spiritual companion. Within the first session she stated in a very no-nonsense way that her husband was going to die early because she had had a premonition about it. She also stated very firmly that she didn't want to talk about it. It took a while before she got used to what spiritual direction was about and was able to tell me the so-called premonition had come in the form of a dream. In this dream she was in bed with another man from the same farming district. To her the only way this might happen was if her husband had died and she had married this second man. Hence her conclusion that her husband was going to die young. We started to deal with the dream in a more symbolic way rather than her very concrete interpretation. We looked at what this second man from the district (not her husband) meant for her – what did she associate him with? It turned out this man was a good dancer and she appreciated that about him as her husband wasn't a great dancer. We talked about what dancing might mean for her – going with the flow, following the rhythm, enjoyment, creativity, etc. This woman was an extremely practical person. As you can tell from this story, she dealt in the concrete, real world rather than in imagination and intuition. She walked through life rather than danced through it, she took the well-trodden pathway rather than the dance floor as the ground for her living. Dreams can be interpreted in different ways. One appropriate symbolic interpretation of her dream however, was that it was an invitation to her to bond more closely with the musical, imaginative, creative, dance-loving side of herself which usually she kept carefully hidden away. We took this path and it was very fruitful for her development. (I might add that her husband died only just under a year ago, aged 80).

That woman, let's call her Paddy, reminds me of Martha. They would both be good housekeepers. Southland Presbyterian women of Paddy's age, especially when they are farmer's wives are excellent housekeepers. Jesus and the disciples calling in unexpectedly for a meal would not be a problem to housekeepers like Marth and Paddy. They would have got on well together. On this occasion however, Martha seems to have got a little flustered. Not surprisingly since Jesus plus at least 12 men would have

been a large company to feed. Let's not treat this story the way Paddy treated her dream as a concrete, real situation where the words on the page mean only what they seem to say. If John Dominic Crossan is correct, and these stories have been written symbolically, then they need to be interpreted symbolically just as Paddy's dream needed a symbolic not a concrete interpretation. Many women have got upset about this story over the years, taking Jesus' comment to Mary as a slight on all women who ever prepared a meal for hungry and men who may be oblivious to the amount of work needed to feed an extra 13 mouths. We should also ask ourselves why this story is about women only. We take many stories which have men as the characters as stories about human beings, applicable to both sexes. Why can't this story with two main female characters be taken as applicable to all genders?

The story tells us that Martha was distracted by the serving. It is common for high achievers to be distracted by their work – this can be an overly conscientious doctor, it can be a hard working lawyer trying to make partner in a prestigious law firm, it can be a self-employed business person trying to get their start-up off the ground, it can be a first year teacher trying to get all their lessons perfect. This story is about the human condition – to become preoccupied with the everyday, routine, the special occasion, with our work, about how our pride in ourselves gets us over working and over anxious about how things are turning out. Martha here is a housekeeper, she could equally be a High Court judge, a cleaner, a teacher, an accountant, a church volunteer, a self-employed food truck operator. The point is that the concrete everyday thing which Martha was doing distracts her from taking time to think, to reflect, to listen, to ponder. One of the traps of the feminist revolution is that women have now made their lives more busy than they might have been before, with more practical and concrete demands on their time and so less time to “wander and wonder”. Particularly when motherhood and work career get to be two of the balls being juggling there is often less time for more reflective pursuits. This has generally been more true for men prior to the 1960s. Not that mothers and housewives ever had a lot of time to star at the far horizon but now there seems to be less time to do that as well as generally in our society less support for anyone men women and non-binary people to live a reflective life. Our cup of tea is permanently full to running over and there does not seem to be time for anything else.

The interesting thing about Martha is that we do meet her later – when Jesus comes following the news of Martha and Mary's brother's death. The house this time is full of wailing women, yet Martha leaves her guests inside the house when she comes out to meet Jesus alone. They have a deeply personal and intensely theological conversation and Martha states her faith in Jesus' sacred status similarly to Peter. This puts her in the top four important spiritual figures in the disciple group of the Gospels along with Peter, John and Mary Magdalene. This later Martha has learned when it is important to do the concrete, real thing and when it is time to leave that behind and feed the spirit within. She has learned that the dishes and the food will always be waiting, but moments of enlightenment and deep wisdom are fleeting and need to be grasped when they are available.

Paddy and her husband? I noticed that last September when he died, that his preference had been followed for a private service on the farm he and his family had worked for decades. Perhaps he learned to be quiet as he worked those foothills, herding cattle and sheep over tussock and through gorse, with the beauty of creation around him. Both he and Paddy obviously felt it was OK not to hold the service in the church both had served for decades; to do the unexpected and the possibly not-quite-approved of in their country district. Perhaps, to speak of him symbolically, Paddy's husband learned to dance too! All of us whether we are reflective people or not, get from time to time that little voice inside urging us to slow, to stop, to reflect or ponder. We will each do it differently. But let's vow today not to let that still small voice of the Spirit to be drowned out by the machinery of our daily lives. Let us promise ourselves that we will give time to be to that inner sacred self. Let us make a private undertaking that we will prioritise the symbolic over the concrete and the sacred over the secular, the still small voice over the noise of argument and protest, trusting that this will assist us to be more wise, more able to advocate for others and more able to be whole. So may it be, AMEN