

The Primacy of Prayer

Trinity 8 – 17th July 2016

'You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing'

+ In nomine ...

CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA AND MARY

Archbishop Michael Ramsey was once asked how long he spent in prayer each morning.

He replied: *'I spend 58 minutes trying to pray, and 2 minutes actually praying'*.

But those 2 minutes were the most important of his day.

We have just heard the story of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary. It is a story about the primacy of prayer in our lives and of the relationship between activity and contemplation.

To help us think about what this Gospel means I have also given you an image – Vermeer's painting of this text. There is great spiritual depth here, and it uncovers the meaning for us.

VERMEER'S PAINTING

Resting in God

Our Lord sits in a relaxed pose.

Jesus is the model for all prayer.

He shows us that prayer is a resting in the presence of God.

But his chair also a throne.

The Lord of all things, the King of the Universe comes into a humble home, just as he will come into our lowly hearts and daily lives if we let him in.

We pray in church, but we should also pray at home so as to sanctify our daily lives.

Concentration

Christ's head is turned towards Martha, who is arrested in the very act of placing bread upon the table.

Her shoulders are tense, her hands red from work, but now she pauses as if turned to stone. She has realised her need to become still as the gaze of God stops her in her tracks.

Martha is worried and distracted – how like us she is!

In our own time there is a crisis of concentration.

It is harder than ever for us to focus when phone, text, tweet and email are available to us at every moment.

Prayer is what brings us back, it teaches us to concentrate once more, it is being attentive to the world around us and to God in all things.

It is the hardest thing in the world, but it is also the easiest.

It is the sheer simplicity that makes it so difficult; stillness, stopping, silence, listening – it all goes against the grain of human nature.

Jesus longs for Martha to join Mary in listening at his feet.

So God longs to give his attention to us, if only we will give our attention to him!

One thing we all want in life is to know that we are loved – but how can we know this if we do not stop a moment to listen and hear God telling us that he does love us?

Eucharist

A fresh loaf of bread. A crisp white cloth – it is like an Altar – and that is the point.

Martha has brought the bread to the table as we bring up the gifts of bread and wine at the Offertory at Mass.

Martha is irritated, anxious, distracted – but in coming to the table she meets Christ and everything changes.

We come to the Altar, we come with our fears and concerns, our hopes and our annoyances, and we bring them before the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, so that we too can be changed.

Freed from our anxiety and distractions.

Changed from Martha into Mary.

Listening

In contrast with Martha's frozen tension, Mary sits calm and relaxed at the feet of Christ – the place of the disciple. Luke intends to say something revolutionary – that women can be disciples too.

This is not her place, but Christ says it is.

Her pose is quiet, but her face is attentive.

We tend to think of prayer as talking to God, and that is not wrong as such, but prayer should also involve listening.

Every conversation must involve listening if there is to be real communication.

Back to our senses

Christ's hand points towards Mary.

But his face is turned to her sister as he says –

'Martha, Martha'

Christ calls her by name.

God calls each one of us personally and individually into relationship with him.

He knows how she is feeling and thinking, she does not need to say.

Our name expresses who we are, God knows the pressures we are all under and our own situations.

'Pray as you can, not as you can't' someone once told me.

Prayer will be different for each one of us depending on who we are.

The nature of our work, the rhythm of our lives, the calls on our time.

But all of us need to prayer if we are to be ourselves.

By saying her name, Christ is calling Martha back to himself, back to her senses and back to what really matters.

Making time for prayer

Nothing else really matters.

Nothing else matters as much.

On the face of it, this is a ridiculous thing to say.

All Martha is doing is being hospitable, doing what needs to be done – the time to sit still is too much of a luxury and an indulgence!

Our Lord does not tell her that what she is doing is wrong in itself, but she has forgotten why she had doing it – she has forgotten the meaning.

When we say we have no time for prayer, what we are really saying is that it isn't enough of a priority – and so it gets squeezed out by other things.

We do not need to be thinking about God every second of the day, but when we pray, even for a moment, it gives meaning to everything.

Our whole routine, all our activity, becomes tinged with the meaning of another dimension.

Prayer does not get in the way, **it is the way**, and everything is affected by it.

The practice of the presence of God

In the exchange of glances between Mary, Martha and Christ there is a movement that reminds us that prayer is a dynamic interface between heaven and earth.

Martha's gaze leads us to Christ, whose arm leads us down to Mary, whose shoulders and head lead us back to her sister.

There is a great separation between this world and the place of God's presence known as heaven. But that chasm is spanned by the slender bridge of golden threads known as prayer. It is our link between this world and the next.

As Christ was the presence of God in human form.

So prayer is the practice of the presence of God in our daily lives.

Two things to help

It is with these thoughts about prayer in mind that I offer to you two things to help you.

First is a *Parish Prayer* diary for you use each day.

Just a moment in prayer on behalf of this church and its parish.

So that wherever you are, you will know that there are others praying the same thing, and we are all united in prayer. It is only a basic list, but it gives you something to focus your prayers on. Please take it with you and put it somewhere where you will see it every day.

And **second** is to say that from September onwards there will be a *Mass on Saturday* at 9.30am, and perhaps on another day too.

It is perhaps surprising that in a church like St Michael's there is only one Mass during the week.

While Sundays' Mass is most important, there is a need here for quieter services at other times. When something terrible happens, like what happened in Nice this week,

the place we can most effectively offer prayer is at the Altar – as we make the holy Sacrifice that pleads the love and mercy of Christ from the Cross for the world.

I hope that many of you will consider, and commit to coming to such other Masses when you can.

For without such prayer, this church has no purpose and our lives have no meaning.

If we do not listen to Christ we cannot follow his call.

If prayer is not a priority, then neither is God.

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Fr Stephen Stavrou