

Sermon by Dominic Doble, 18th July, 2010

Year C Seventh After Trinity 18 - 07 - 10 'Abide'

Well once again, good morning to you all! So here I am! It is a great pleasure to be up here preaching for you for the first time. I have to say I am truly grateful to God, the Diocese, Nigel and the Church Wardens for granting me the opportunity to minister amongst you. It is a great privilege to be amongst such Godly, welcoming and helpful people in such a beautiful part of the world. However, I accept that there are painful, empty, cold and dark times aplenty here too. It is my hope that God's presence will abide with us through those times also.

In fact, it is abiding that is the subject of our message this morning. I've just read in the Gospel of that odd domestic episode in which Martha asks Jesus to tell her sister off for not helping. Whereupon He immediately... doesn't! As we look forward to Sunday lunch ourselves it is not unlikely that those with family or guests will experience similar situations. Can't you just imagine it: Jill tells Jack to lay the table whilst Peter and Jack talk amongst themselves. Five minutes later Jill notices Jack hasn't moved and tells Peter to get him to get up off his backside and pull his weight! Yes, Jesus, really had real friends who really rowed - and, let me tell you, the Judeans knew how to row. That might be both a revelation and a consolation to some of us, I don't know! Yet, as is almost always the way with the Word of God, which is living and active and sharper than a two edged sword, there is more to this passage than that transcendent realism.

The first thing to note is that, remarkably, we find a story involving two women. I say 'remarkably' advisedly because it occurs in the middle of this generally male-authored, male-dominated Scriptures. Our Scriptures that narrate the relationship between humanity, or should I say 'mankind' and the Triune God. The Hebrew Scripture reading for today sees God, The Lord, described as three men when He pops in to tell Sarah she is to have a son called 'Laughter'. Though God made male and female in their image and wishes to gather the people as a hen her chicks, the divine single parent is generally referred to as 'Father'. For legal reasons around adoption, I accept that that makes sense. Then there is Jesus who is undoubtedly male, of course. Yet the Holy Spirit, particularly, in the ravishing Wisdom literature enjoys either, neither or both, female and male allegory!

Be that as is may, let us return to earth! Martha is very much in control back, some say, in Bethany attempting, without servants, to organise something; probably a meal. Perhaps, that is not so odd. After all, women were and are significant in the Jewish home and family. We may note in passing that even today Jewishness continues to pass through the maternal line. However, there is something radical hidden in the assumed inactivity of her sister; something hidden in Mary's abiding. She is reprimanded for 'sitting at the Lord's feet'. This could be code for learning from Him. Disciples were said to 'sit at the feet' of their rabbis. Just a quick glance at the arrangement of the temple courts reveals how subversive her discipleship would have been considered. The court of women kept them at arms length from the court of Israelites. That is complete Jewish men. They themselves were at one remove from the Priests. Even they were excluded from the Holy of Holies, with the exception of the High Priest once a year. Women were to learn in silence from their husbands at home. Recent Synodical decisions notwithstanding, here we see scripture apparently, presenting Christ - the head of the Church - endorsing two female roles. He will, we assume, accept Martha's leadership by eating the product of it at her table in due course. For the Judean sharing a meal was tantamount to endorsement, an act of solidarity. Further, he accepts Mary's freedom and ability to learn in a manner presumed only to be available to men. So by implication we may assume He endorses her freedom and ability to teach, and not just women or Sunday School children.

So it seems for Luke, Jesus promoted leading and teaching by women. Another way of looking at the sibling rivalry before us, is as fuel to the fire of the faith or works debate. Let us remind ourselves of the two positions. Firstly, Paul writes in Romans that a person is 'justified by faith without works'. Yet, secondly, the author of James writes 'what good is it if you have faith without works?'. Jesus' response to Martha's whinge seems to imply that he sides with Paul. 'Martha, Martha (don't you just love the way he calls her by name and tenderly twice) you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.' Now it seems to me that we do not have to deal with faith and works as if they were two irreconcilable positions. When people are in love, and there is that certain chemistry, they just are in love without 'doing anything'. That is like being 'justified by faith'. We are in relationship with God and when we chose to make ourselves open to His saving will for us there it is. At one level, without 'doing' anything we should know our past loneliness, guilt and shame sorted out forever. Further, a future secure in Him opens out before us beyond anything we can ask or imagine. So what do lovers do when they find themselves in love. Do they just sit back and put their feet up? No! At best, they do three things. Leave, cleave and become one flesh that is they abide, or move in, together. They also do day to day routine things for each other. In addition they do occasional spontaneous crazy things like throw a surprise party or bring home a take-away, bottle of wine and a DVD. I'd say its the

same with us and God. We join His Church. We do important, though perhaps sometimes mundane, things. Perhaps we might admit even sometimes to be doing them out of little more than a sense of duty! Yet sometimes we might do something really special, like make a big donation, or get involved in an annual event, as a one off, such as the Activity Week later this month. Besides Luke can't have wanted this story to teach us to give up on charitable works altogether. After all, just before today's episode he gave us the favourite Sunday School story we had as last week's Gospel, namely 'the Good Samaritan'. You can't get much more charitable than that! So there you have it: faith and works, like love and marriage, they go together like a horse and carriage. I'm not sure how that would have gone down as a supporting text at theological college but there you are!

We've heard how Mary abided, abode, or whatever, at Jesus' feet. She was learning from Him: a woman in a man's world. We've also heard how abiding in Jesus need not be a question of one or the other or when it comes to faith and works. They are both sides of the same coin. However, I wish to say more on the notion of abiding.

Where are we abiding? You and I, I mean. Are we at Jesus feet or rushing about in the worst possible sense. We may be homeless. In the wrong place. Not just without a roof but not belonging. Perhaps, we are rushing to fill out our storehouses to make a mark for ourselves before we die - ignorant of our value to God in Christ. We may be rushing about in the full knowledge that God is there but, nevertheless, trying to work our way into his favour or prove to Him how acceptable He should consider us. We may know Jesus to be present, nay even important to us as our saviour. Yet we are still rushing about, no doubt, this time, in the best possible sense but nevertheless still rushing about. I would suggest that through returning and rest we ought to contemplate the house we live in. Is it not better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the lord than to dwell in the courts of the unrighteous? With our brothers and sisters in Christ are we abiding in, or present to, the blessing of almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit being amongst us and remaining with us? This dwelling, not made by the will of man, is amongst other things, a house of peace:

The peace of God

which passes all understanding

keep your hearts and minds

in the knowledge and love of God

and of His son Jesus Christ our Lord...

'Peace' in the Hebrew is more than the absence of war. It is more than the absence of noise, or even the absence of busy-ness that Martha might have longed for. 'Shalom' is a positive attribute. It is what the counsellor might call unconditional positive regard before God with an attendant propensity to prosper in Him. To give us some idea of what that peace might be like we need look no further than this morning's Epistle. There we heard that Christ is the image of God. The first-born creator of all things, including powers. In whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. He has now reconciled us through death, presenting us holy, blameless and irreproachable to God. The immensity of that mind blowing generosity and provision brings to my mind the image of the mansion of many rooms. It is, of course, a vision of heaven where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. Yet even as we pray 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' we need not wait for pie in the sky when we die. The Kingdom of Heaven is near: steak on plate while we wait! Imagine abiding in such a mansion, not then, but here and now. In my view, it is the seal of the Holy Spirit that is the pledge of this inheritance. An inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. The Holy Spirit is how we abide in Him and He in us: by whom; with whom and in whom. The Holy Spirit is our comforter or strengthener and Her fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is the rich inheritance in which we may abide at the feet of Christ.

An abode of many rooms or many blessings. That is the abiding that Mary enjoyed at the feet of Jesus. Small wonder, she was prepared to anoint his feet with her dowry. Though precious and costly, what a trifling gift it seems compared to that which those feet were to win for her on being nailed to the tree. Later we will survey that wondrous cross as in our communion we remember Christ's death until he comes. We cannot tell what words Mary uttered in her act of devotion then but with Watts we may sing:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were an offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.