

Homily for 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

By Fr Steele Hartmann

“It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her.” (Luke 10:42) These words of Jesus have often been used to promote contemplative religious life as the better part over against the active religious life. The contemplative is seen as Mary sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to what he is saying, while the active is the Martha of religious life being distracted by her many tasks. The reality is that both have their place and one is not better than another. That a person is called to one and not the other does not in any way make that that person more or less blessed than another who chooses the other way of religious life. Apart from that, such an interpretation of this Gospel story is too narrow. It ignores completely all those many others who choose neither the contemplative nor the active forms of religious life, but who are happy to live the ordinary Christian life. This word of the Lord is addressed to all Christians, and so must have a meaning for all.

In attempting to find a more universal meaning, some have focused on the fact that Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to him speaking. The word “to listen” means “hear and obey”. It has two parts: hearing, and obeying. Both are necessary. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tells a parable of a man who has two sons, both of whom he asks to go and work in his vineyard. (Matthew 21:28-32) One hears him and says he will but does not go, the other refuses but thinks better of it and does so. The latter is praised for doing the father’s will; he is the one who listened to his father. To hear and not obey is not listening. So we can take it that the Mary in today’s Gospel is not praised for being some passive figure who just sits at the Lord’s feet, hearing him speak. For we are all called to help bring in the Lord’s harvest. (Luke 10:2) If we hear the call and do nothing about it, we do not do the Father’s will. That the Father’s will is done is Jesus’ concern and so, even for Mary, there will be and must be some element of doing.

This doing, however, makes no sense without the hearing, for how can we obey if we do not know what it is that we have do. Activity unrelated to a command is not doing the Father’s will, but doing our own will, doing what we think is right and good. And indeed it may well be a good thing that we do — but that does not make it the Father’s will. And it could be that the Father is calling us to do something else, something different. We are all familiar with the husband who works hard, fourteen hours every day, to ensure that his family has everything it needs — good home, good food, good clothes, good school, ... every good thing you could wish for your family. He is amazed and shocked the day he comes home and discovers they have moved out. He is bitter and disillusioned; he has done everything he could to be what he thought was a good father and a good husband; it was all for them. Trouble was that when he came home he was too tired from all his doing to give them any of his time, so he ended up no husband and no father at all, but just someone who pays the bills. Doing does not always equal doing the right thing. Our doing must be related to hearing. Whether we are a Mary or a

Martha, we are all called to listen, to hear and obey. It is not a case of either/or, but both/and. It is the hearing that turns our doing into obedience, the doing of our Father's will.

There is something to be said for this approach to today's Gospel. However, perhaps the context of this story gives us a better clue as to how we might look at it. This passage follows the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of the mission of the Seventy-Two whom Jesus sent out to preach the Good News. The Seventy-Two came back rejoicing from the success of all their activity. (Luke 10:17) In answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and concludes, "Do likewise yourself." (Luke 10:37) It's as though, in this morning's story of Martha and Mary, Jesus wants to put in a corrective on all this doing, on all this activity. Christians are not simply those who do good things. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, when we are given an account of the Twelve apostles' return from their missionary endeavours, we are told that Jesus 'took them with him and withdrew to a town called Bethsaida where they could be by themselves'. (Luke 9:10) In St Mark's version of this story, Jesus says to them, "You must come away to some lonely place and rest a while." Jesus' concern here grew out of the fact that 'there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat.' (Mark 6:31)

Busyness was a problem even in Jesus' day! Busy-ness will wear us out. We need timeout to recharge, lest we burnout. If we are to be able to keep on working in the Father's vineyard, we need to find time to 'rest a while.' It is timeout to do 'nothing', a seeming waste of time, as against all the busy-ness involved in meeting the pressing needs of people who are starving for life, hungering for spiritual food. This story this morning of Martha and Mary, with its emphasis on sitting quietly with Jesus and following as it does the missionary activity of the seventy-two, parallels this earlier passage showing Jesus' concern that the Twelve have timeout with him after all their activity. This morning's passage adds something to the earlier in that it tells us that this resting is not simply timeout, not just a period of R&R (rest and relaxation), but rather timeout with Jesus, a time of listening to Jesus. For us, what this amounts to is prayer-time. What Jesus is telling us is that we need to take time out to pray. Elsewhere Jesus remarks, "You have the poor with you always, and you can be kind to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me." (Mark 14:7) There will always be people in need; there will always be something that needs to be done and done now. And prayer is the most accommodating thing. If we say, "I just have to do this," it says, "OK!" And whatever else it might be that needs us, again it says, "OK!" If we don't give prayer a priority, it won't happen — because there is always something pressing, indeed more pressing, and in need of our attention. What Jesus is saying is that there is nothing more pressing than timeout with him. We need to give prayer a priority. It is not enough to be doing good things. We need to balance it with prayer — indeed out of it will flow all our activity; in it we will know what we must do. It is prayer that is the better part, and we should not let it be taken from us. (Luke 10:42)