

*May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

A common refrain that echoed throughout my childhood were the infamous words – ‘It’s not fair’. It’s not fair. I mean having two sisters, one of them being my twin, ‘it’s not fair’ was a constant expression of my regular annoyance that every once in a while, one of them seemed to be getting a much better deal than me - a larger gift perhaps, an extra sweet, a longer time watching Television. It’s not fair, I often protested to my parents – it’s simply not fair that I’m being treated differently to them.

I mean why do I have to tidy away the toys when it was Esther who made most of the mess? Why does Lucy get to choose what game we play when it was her who chose last time? As a slightly funny side note – I once, apparently, whilst playing crazy golf with Lucy my twin sister accidentally hit her over the head with a golf club, and after she received an ice lolly as a make-do ice pack to calm the growing bump on her forehead, I angrily demanded that I too received an ice lolly as a nice refreshing treat after a successful trip to the park. It’s simply not fair – everything and everyone has to be treated the same.

There is something of the sibling rivalry, the annoyance, the frustration when in today’s Gospel reading, Martha storms in front of Christ and says rather plainly to him – ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ Jesus and the other disciples have just arrived at Mary and Martha’s home, perhaps with very little notice, Martha is rushing and running around, trying to put some decent food on the table for them, offering out her hospitality to these people who’ve visited. And whilst she slaves away, out of sight, Mary is casually kneeling in front of Jesus, listening in, chatting away – abandoning her duties, forgetting to lend a hand – you can almost hear Martha’s voice in the background as she works away – ‘typical Mary, never pulling her weight, getting all this special time with Jesus when I’m busy – it’s not fair, it’s simply not fair.’

And when she eventually goes to confront Jesus, hoping he’ll side with her, his response is not what she was probably expecting – ‘Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.’ Hang on a minute – Martha is doing what she is expected to be doing yet it seems like Jesus is criticising her here, calling her out. Oh well Mary’s got it sorted, you’re just a mess Martha. Is he actually implying that Mary’s sitting and listening is in some way ‘better’ than Martha’s acts of hospitality?

Well Claire Hayns, the chaplain of Christ Church College in Oxford, who’s sermon on this passage I have been reading this week, makes an excellent point here. It is tempting when reading the story of Mary and Martha to read into it a sort of dichotomy between different aspects of the Christian life – a life of prayer and contemplation on the one hand, being somewhat ‘better’, or more ‘spiritual’ than a life of service on the other. Oh it’s much more spiritual standing up here as a priest than it would be helping to serve coffee after Communion.

But if we look at the Greek word that’s translated as ‘many things’ in this passage – ‘Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things’ – that word is the Greek word – diakonos – it’s where we get the word ‘deacon’ from, the word Jesus uses when he says to his followers - ‘whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, your deacon, your diakonos’. Indeed, last Sunday morning, Fr. Barry spoke to us about the story of the Good Samaritan, the story directly before our

passage today, a story that completely commends acts of service – the person that best demonstrated the heart of God was the person who showed mercy to those in need, helping and serving them tirelessly.

So it cannot be the case, Claire Hayns points out, that Jesus is in fact criticising Martha here for her acts of service – she isn't worse than Mary, Mary isn't better than her – she was doing a wonderful, loving, hospitable thing. Jesus is not prioritising one act of discipleship over another – what he is doing, is gently reminding Martha that even though she was doing the right thing, she had become distracted, agitated, worried – her attention had moved away from wanting to serve and look after Jesus and the other disciples, and upon Mary and her own frustrations.

'Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity'. 'Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity'. This is quote by Simone Weil, the French philosopher and activist. When we pay attention to somebody, when somebody pays attention to us – it's a moment of focus, of building relationship, of valuing the person we're with. Being seen for who we are, being loved and accepted – Mary was placing all her attention on God in this story, focussed on being with Christ, listening to him, gazing upon him. Martha's attention, on the other hand, was on herself, on her annoyance that Mary was not doing what she ought to, rather than focussing on her own relationship with Jesus. God was in her midst and yet she chose to look elsewhere.

This is not a story, therefore, that tells us that acts of service play second fiddle in the life of a disciple. This is not a story that tells us that a contemplative life, a life of prayer and devotion is all that is needed. No. This is a story that asks us to question who and what we are paying attention to, who are we orientated towards, where is our focus, our heart – as we go about our daily lives, who do we notice, who might we try and avoid? Where might God be in our midst, can we spend some time focussed on him, do we try to look and see his face reflected in those around us, those we're called to serve? 'Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity' – 'it is the better part', Jesus says. It is a gift. Amen.

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