

Ps 93:1,4  
Ps 71:8,9  
Ps 49:1,4,5  
Hy 50:1,6,7  
Hy 41:3,4  
Luke 10:1-24; 38-42  
1 Corinthians 7:25-35  
Luke 10:42a

Yarrow, November 22, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Life, we find, is busy. There's always so much to do, be it in the home, at school, in the communion of saints, in attending meetings, in Bible study, in daily work, and the list goes on. The busyness brings its own level of anxiety and frustration as we find we just can't get it all done....

Then we read the portion of Scripture about Martha and Mary, and we conclude that maybe we need to spend more time with Bible study because that, after all, is so very important. But even as we come to that conclusion, something inside us reminds us that that just isn't going to work because things still have to get done – and those things-not-as-important-as-Bible-study are still so important and pressing after all.... So we find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place; what ought we to do and what ought we to leave in the busyness of life?! The question brings its own anxiety and stress..., and feelings of guilt.

Luke wrote a gospel for the benefit of a certain Theophilus, a man as we are, busy also with the cares of life. He read the account of Martha and Mary, and Jesus' words in that context, and was to conclude that – one thing was needful, and it's what Mary had chosen over Martha, listening over hosting. But how, we wonder, could that message help Theophilus – or us?

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **ONE THING IS NEEDFUL: TUNED IN TO WHERE GOD IS AT.**

1. The Riddle of Jesus' Answer
2. The Timing of Jesus' Answer
3. The Lesson of Jesus' Answer

### **1. The Riddle of Jesus' Answer**

We can, brothers and sisters, imagine the scene before our eyes. Martha, all in a flap, stands with her hands on her hips in front of Jesus and vents her frustrations: "don't You care that my sister has left me to do the work myself? Tell her to come and help me in the kitchen!"

To be honest, we find her demand quite reasonable. Jesus with an unknown number of His disciples had fronted up at her door one afternoon, and Martha had graciously welcomed the group into her home. After the initial chatter that came with welcoming guests and making sure they were comfortably seated in the living room, Martha had retreated into the kitchen to provide the things a good hostess is expected to provide. Depending on the hour of the day in which Jesus arrived, that could include Israel's equivalent to a cup of coffee or tea, preparations for supper, organizing bedding for the guests, thinking ahead about tomorrow's breakfast, and perhaps considering whether to offer her guests a lunch basket for tomorrow's travels. All in all, there's a lot on Martha's plate. And cutting

corners just won't do; even for unannounced company our sisters know that Christian hospitality would have us do our best. We much understand, then, that Martha would work up a sweat in the kitchen trying to get it all together.

It turns out that Martha has a sister, Mary. It seems to us reasonable and right that Mary would offer to give some help in the kitchen. That, too, we understand, is simply the right thing to do; you're not sisters for nothing – especially if you live together, as seems to be the case here (see John 11). But Mary didn't volunteer to help sister Martha with getting tea together or supper or bedding; Mary sat in the living room with the men, listening to the conversation. Somehow we can quite well understand that this turn of events got under Martha's skin and irritated her to no end. We might just say the same: "Lord, don't You care that my sister left me alone [in the kitchen] to serve? Tell her to get up and help me."

How, brothers and sisters, ought Jesus to reply? What's a fitting answer?? Stop for a moment, and think this one through. If Martha in the kitchen was so frustrated with Mary's failure to help her, why did Martha not slip quietly to the door of the living room to get Mary's attention and signal to her to come help? Or, failing that, why did she not quietly call out Mary's name? Why avoid talking to Mary, come physically into the living room in front of Jesus (vs 40), interject Jesus' conversation, and ask Him (guest though He was!) to tell her sister what to do?! Isn't this most embarrassing for Mary?? Doesn't it show us a Martha who's out of control? On top of that, why does Martha confront Jesus with wrong-doing? For she ask Him, "don't *You* care that my sister has left me to do the work myself?" Is making sure the hostess' sister does her domestic duties actually the guest's responsibility?? The more we think about it, the more it seems to us that Martha is making a total fool of herself, and making things very awkward for Mary and for Jesus in the process. Hence the question again: how ought Jesus to respond? What's a fitting answer??

Jesus' reply? With tenderness He speaks her name twice: "Martha, Martha," and then continues: "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed." He adds: "Mary has chosen the good portion" – and we conclude: Jesus says that sitting in the living room listening to Jesus is more important than slaving in the kitchen to look after your guests. But that just doesn't sound real to us; try it next time you have company for supper and see how it goes....

How, then, shall we solve this riddle? That brings us to our second point:

## 2. The Timing of Jesus' Answer

What was Jesus talking about in the living room? That is: into what conversation did Martha interject with her frustrated question, "Lord, don't you care...?"

I remind you that Jesus is en route from Galilee in northern Israel to Jerusalem in the south. Yet Jerusalem is not His final destination, but His ascension into heaven is (see Luke 9:51,31). Meanwhile, His time in Jerusalem will be characterized by suffering and rejection, then He'll be killed and on the third day arise (9:22). This is Jesus' God-given program; He is to crush the head of the serpent, but in the process His own heel will be bruised. Even so, He'll be victorious and so His ascension to the throne at God's right hand is certain; after Jerusalem He'll be crowned King of kings.

Since that's the program God has given to His Son, the Son set about –on His way to Jerusalem– to announce what was happening. That's how chap 10 begins. The Lord –and the term means He's the Master– "appointed 72 others" beside His 12 disciples "and sent them two by two ahead of Him to every town and place where He was about to go" (vs 1). As they travelled, these 72 were (says vs 7) to eat and drink what was given to them. More, they were to "heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you'" (vs 9). Who the King of that kingdom was? The King in the kingdom

of God was, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – now on His way to Jerusalem, to the cross, and then to heaven to the throne at God’s right hand.

To their great delight, the 72 tasted the power of this kingdom of God right away. Look at vs 17: they returned with joy, reporting that “even the demons submit to us in Your name.” Exciting!! In a world of evil, with so many bitter fruits of the fall into sin, this was obviously glorious news! This was encouraging!

But Jesus, brothers and sisters, is more tuned in to reality than these 72. For He tells them, vs 18: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” Why did Satan streak from heaven to earth? That’s because his kingdom on earth is under attack, and Satan won’t take that lightly! So he’s come to earth to engage the battle. And the battle will be intense, so intense that there’s comfort for the disciples in the fact that their names are written in heaven (vs 20); Satan shall not be able to pluck them from the Father’s hand.

Why this material is important? It’s important, congregation, because the anecdote concerning Martha and Mary happened –says vs 38– while Jesus and His disciples “were on their way” – where to?– to Jerusalem. It happened while Satan had come down to earth to direct his battle. More, Martha and Mary knew that Jesus was en route to Jerusalem, and knew about the coming of the kingdom of God. I say that because Luke recorded in 10:1 that the 72 were sent “to every town and place where [Jesus] was about to go” – and by definition that includes Martha’s village. The man who appeared at Martha’s door was not a stranger to Martha and her sister Mary but at a minimum had already been introduced by a pair of the 72 Jesus had sent out earlier. Martha and Mary knew that their guest claimed to inaugurate the kingdom of God. That is why Martha addresses Him as ‘Lord’ and why Mary is described as sitting at the ‘Lord’s’ feet.

That makes clear, then, too, what Jesus was talking about, what Mary wanted so badly to hear. If the 72 had to go to the towns to heal the sick and declare that the Kingdom of God was coming, Jesus was surely not talking about how pretty Martha’s marigolds were. Count on it that Jesus Himself had to answer questions on precisely the subject the 72 had been sent to proclaim – and will have used the opportunity to expand on what the coming of this kingdom meant. And it’s while Jesus is talking about these things that Martha steps into the room with her demand to have Jesus tell Mary to get to work.

We realize: that *timing* determines the flavour of Jesus’ reply. He speaks here as Lord, as King! He’s on His way to the throne, and while on His way spending the night in this village. He’s on His way to the throne, and while on His way very aware that His enemy the devil has come down to Him in cunning rage. He’s on His way to the throne, and *time is pressing* – the enemy will not allow it to be otherwise! He’s on His way to the throne, and *shall He now get caught in a domestic dispute?* Must He stand between the sisters and sort out what they don’t seem to be able to sort out between the two of them? Must He, given where things are now at in this moment of history, actually show them what’s important?! But what’s important when Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, on His way to heaven, what’s important when “the kingdom of God is near” and when Satan has come like a bolt of lightning out of heaven is obviously not how elaborate tonight’s dinner is going to be!!

You see, that’s why Jesus reprimands Martha as He does. Martha acknowledges Jesus as King, as Lord, and that’s why she comes to Him with the request that He please tell Mary what good kingdom manners are – help with the serving, get to work. But Jesus puts her in her place. “Martha, Martha,” He says, “you are worried and upset about many things.” Better: you’re anxious and stressed about many things, be it coffee, supper, sleeping arrangements, breakfast, and so on. But Martha, *in the current circumstances* –and you know what they are– “only one thing is needed.” What that one thing is? *It’s being tuned in to the present realities*, and as consequence recognizing that listening to Jesus’

instruction is more important than cooking up a roast. The listening to Jesus is, of course, what Mary was doing, and that's why Jesus can say in the closing words of this story that what Mary chose to do "will not be taken away from her."

We come to the last point:

### 3. The Lesson of Jesus' Answer.

We don't live in the days of Jesus' travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus has long ago completed His travels, including His suffering in Jerusalem, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension into heaven to the throne over God's world. He's today firmly in control of His kingdom, so much so that the entire world *is* His kingdom. The Satan who fell like lightning from heaven in Luke 10 to direct his battle on earth has long ago been defeated, and –says the Lord in Revelation 20– has even been "bound ... for a thousand years" – and that period represents the entirety of the New Testament dispensation, including today. We, then, don't live in the urgency of Luke 10.... And that would lead us to conclude that things are back to normal, that it's OK for us to get back into the kitchen and focus on entertaining our guests well....

Yet that, brothers and sisters, would not do justice to Jesus' answer. The urgency of our moment is indeed different than the urgency of Martha's moment in Luke 10. But that doesn't mean that our moment has *no* urgency. Satan may be bound, but he's not without clout and danger in our world! The same book of Revelation that describes Satan as bound describes him as furious, and gone off to make war against the people of God (Revelation 12). More, it's true that Christ has received the throne of the world, but in this world there remain so many people who refuse to acknowledge Him as king. Since they don't acknowledge Christ as King, they live for this life with its pleasures and fulfillment – and that puts its own pressure on the people of God in turn to do the same. Because of temptation from the devil, the world and our flesh, there's so much that can readily *distract* us from the one thing that's needful, that can pull our eye away from the urgency of today's moment.

That's why it's important to notice how the apostle Paul worked in 1 Corinthians 7 with the lesson of Jesus' answer in Luke 10. Paul has to address the question whether fathers should let their daughters get married (vss 25ff). Paul knows of no specific word from the Lord Jesus Christ on the topic, and so has to work with other aspects of the Lord's revelation. Then he says, vs 26: "because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are" – if married, stay married; if unmarried, stay unmarried.

"Because of the present crisis": what's that a reference to? Paul expands in vs 29: "what I mean, brothers, is that the time is short." So: those who have wives should live as though they don't, those who mourn as though they don't, those who are happy as though they're not, those with property as though it's not theirs to keep, those who use the things of this world as though not caught up in them. Why? "For this world in its present form is passing away." His point? This world won't last. In fact, the end can be at any moment. So, get your priorities right! Marriage isn't everything; in fact, there won't be any marriage in the New Jerusalem. Roast dinner for your guests isn't everything; in fact, when the Lord returns that roast will burn. Paul sums it up with the words of vs 35: "I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way *in undivided devotion to the Lord.*"

Undivided devotion: that is what Mary displayed as she sat at the feet of the Teacher as He traveled from Galilee to the cross and to His throne! Undivided devotion: that allows for no distraction, no anxiety and stress about the demands of hospitality. Martha, meanwhile, "was distracted by all the

preparations that had to be made.” Hers was not an “undivided devotion to the Lord” that reflected where things were at in the Lord’s world.

Here, then, is the lesson of Jesus’ answer to Martha. The one thing that is needed is “undivided devotion” to the Lord – and such undivided devotion is tuned in to where things are actually at in the Lord’s progress towards in working salvation. The Christians of Corinth were not living in the days before Jesus went to the cross and so did not share the tension and the suspense that belongs in Luke 10 – when Satan has come down to champion his claim against Jesus of Nazareth and will use anything to distract attention away from Jesus’ words about the coming of the kingdom. The Christians of Corinth lived in the days before Christ’s return on the clouds of heaven to destroy sin and Satan completely, and that brought its own urgency, its own priorities – and, says Paul, ensuring that your daughters get married off, important as that may be, is not one of those priorities. Priority is always the Lord Himself, and everything else has its place under that priority. Organizing coffee, preparing supper, being a good hostess has its place, undoubtedly, but not as ends in themselves; such good activities have their place *only as subsets to an undivided devotion to the Lord*.

What, then, is the lesson for us? We live in the shadow of Christ’s second return even more strongly than did the brothers and sisters of Corinth when Paul wrote them his letter. In other words, the time is today shorter than it was then! But that puts urgency and suspense and tension into the air today. Christ comes again at any moment, and Satan knows that well. So he does his best to distract, to get us caught up with the stresses and strains our social expectations impose upon us, to have us think we need to keep up with the Jones’. In the process the things that have to be done on grounds that Christ is coming any moment get pushed to the back-burner, and then I’m thinking of things like ensuring that the children are ready to meet the Lord, that the Word of redemption goes out powerfully through us into this world, and so on.

“One thing is needed,” says Jesus, and that’s “undivided devotion to the Lord”, to where things are at in His program. Being conscious of what Jesus Christ is doing today determines what the Christian will do, determines what is important for the Christian. That focus will never cause embarrassment, but will be a treasure never taken from the devoted child of God.