

SUNDAY 16C BIRKENHEAD 2022

There is an old saying about prayer which became popular again recently. The saying is 'to work is to pray'. To work is to pray. The saying came from the medieval monasteries and it simply means that all life is prayer. That is, if prayer is an offering to God, then all life is to be an offering to God. As far as the monks and nuns who used the phrase were concerned, it meant that their work in the kitchen, the study, the garden or farm was as much an act of prayer as their worship in chapel or their personal devotions. Work and worship were both an offering to God and could be considered prayer.

When this saying became popular recently it came to mean something different. The new meaning was that if work was prayer then one didn't need to spend time on one's knees or attend public worship. Praying was considered to be any work and especially work which was to help others. Formal prayer was seen to be a

hindrance to this work because this work had tangible results.

2

The practical nature of work was more rewarding for the person who did it and also for those who benefited from it. Any form of social work, helping the poor and needy, became the only prayer of many people. I still hear people talk about the good deeds they do and say they don't need to go to church. Social action is all that is required for some who think that this fulfils their Christian life. Prayer should issue in social action. Now we are often left with the action without any sense of it being prayer. The action has lost its sense of offering to God because worship, both public and personal, has been neglected.

The story of Martha and Mary is one which points us to the necessity to hold prayer and action together. I know this story is not a popular one because Martha always seems to come off second best. It's easier for many of us to identify

with Martha because, like her, we are busy people with many things to do. Being busy is expected. We are encouraged to fill our time with many activities.

3

We dare not say we are not busy because that implies laziness. To sit and do nothing but talk and listen like Mary is considered a waste of time.

But this story is not drawing a contrast between being active and being passive, between being busy or being still. The story recognises that both are necessary and both can be prayerful. Martha's problem was not that she had to prepare a meal. It wouldn't have helped her at all to sit down and listen to Jesus. She was a domestic soul and as such could have found God among her duties. It wasn't her usefulness which prevented her from finding God. The problem was her anxious fussiness.

At the start of this story Martha's intention was to welcome Jesus. She wanted to receive him

properly and be able to provide Jesus with food and rest. Gradually her attitude changes. Instead of her attention being on welcoming Jesus she becomes concerned about the success of the reception.

4

Martha was no longer concerned about serving Jesus, she was concerned about the success of her project.

Unfortunately Martha also causes another problem for herself. Instead of asking Mary for some help, Martha complains to Jesus. Martha expects a go between to solve her problem. Had she simply asked Mary she may have had her problem solved. As usual Jesus seems to have the answer. He says there is one thing needed. The only thing needed is to welcome him. The only thing needed is hospitality. This hospitality of welcome brings one into relationship. Mary welcomed Jesus by sitting and listening. Martha welcomed by preparing food and serving Jesus.

When Martha became worried about the success of her task, then she thought more of herself and less of the person she was trying to serve and welcome.

5

This story is important for what it tells us about prayer and worship being hand in hand with social action. Activity and quietness can both be prayer. They can both be offerings to God. But when our attention is solely on the activity or solely on the quietness, then things are out of balance. We will miss the object of our devotion. We will miss seeing the person we are trying to serve and become concerned for ourselves.

Whether we participate in social action or in public and personal worship the object is hospitality. Prayer is about giving hospitality to God. In worship our aim is to welcome God. We listen to readings, prayers and hymns. It is

possible to become over concerned with the actual activity and forget that the object is to hear God speaking to us. In prayer and worship the object is to welcome God into our lives. We welcome God into our lives so that we might live in thanksgiving for the hospitality God offers to us.

6

Our living is simply a response to what God has already done in welcoming us into the divine life.

Social action is also about hospitality. It's about showing a welcome to those who are in need. We may be relieving their physical discomfort, but more than that it's about accepting them as people loved by God. We accept them because God does. We are to see the divine in others and welcome them as God does.

It is as simple and natural as welcoming a close friend into our lives. Sometimes it is just as

difficult. Whatever we do to welcome it should not get in the way of the purpose which is the other person. Hospitality can take many forms. It can be just sitting and listening. It can be providing food. Both are necessary just as prayer is as necessary as social action.

and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and strengthened for service. There is need of only one thing: attention to our guest. As it turns out, our guest is also our host, with abundant gifts to give if we are willing to receive them.

7

I suppose you could say we are in the centre of the hospitality industry of Auckland. Though recently Covid has put a serious strain on this industry. Perhaps in a strange way it is a shame that hospitality has become an industry. However this industry of hospitality exists to remind us of our need to be hospitable. It also exists to remind us of God's hospitality in accepting us and welcoming us to his table.

We do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace