Reflection on Tension for 16th March 2022 -prepared by Fiona

Opening words: This week, we are meeting in person. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us', we meditate at 7.30 pm on Wednesday in the prayer room of Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob and Hazel, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate, beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation, may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence, may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**



Introduction: Today I would like to focus on the tension within the faithful heart. Some believe it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to have a deep spiritual life and at the same time live in the modern world with a serious commitment to our daily work and family responsibilities. For many centuries two (presumably) unmarried sisters whom Jesus visited at their home at Bethany, near Jerusalem, have been held to represent two rival lifestyles. According to this traditional interpretation Mary of Bethany exemplifies the way of contemplation, the life of union with God. Similarly, Martha is seen as the personification of an active life of work. But does the contemplative life solely consist in simply being at the feet of Jesus? For Martha we must find God in our daily job, transforming our work into an expression of our faith. Perhaps holding these two approaches in healthy tension is the way forward. In this way we may show our love for God through the exercise of the human as well as the supernatural virtues.

Jesus Visits Martha and Mary Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, He [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha
welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to
what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord,
do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' 41 But the
Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only
one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Jesus gave us two commandments:

The story of Martha and Mary is part of a larger narrative in Luke which begins with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It opens with the familiar Great Commandment from Deuteronomy 6 to "love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" combined with the words from Leviticus 19," you shall love your neighbour as yourself.".

These two verses come together in the famous greatest commandment at Luke 10:27 (also in Matthew 22 and Mark). [27] 'He answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, Love your neighbour as yourself.'

The Good Samaritan narrative, directly preceding the Martha and Mary passage in Luke 10 verse 25 describes a Jewish Theologian testing Jesus by asking what he must do to receive eternal life. The theologian replied correctly, quoting the Deuteronomy and Leviticus passages above. He then asked Jesus to clarify what was meant by neighbour. Jesus replies with a parable. In the story a man was attacked and beaten by bandits. A priest, who perhaps represents the contemplative passed by on the opposite side of the road, then a Levite or assistant priest did the same thing. But a Samaritan, the active one, bandaged the injured man's wounds, carried him on a donkey, brought him to an inn and nursed him. Presumably needing to attend to business, the Samaritan paid the inn keeper and promised that on his return he would pay any expenses. Jesus asked the Theologian who of the three other men was the good neighbour to the unfortunate man. Again, the Theologian answered correctly, replying: "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Returning to the story of Mary and Martha, in the classic interpretation Mary, thought of as younger, realized their privilege, so she decided to sit down and take in Jesus' teaching. But Martha? Well, as is often said, she was neither sitting down nor taking it all in. She was caught up in worldly activities; however the text does not say that she was not listening while she was working…

We read that Martha was "distracted." Instead of relaxing and enjoying the Lord's presence, Martha was seemingly in a frenzy over all her preparations while her sister sat in the room with Jesus and the guests. A classic interpretation is that the anxiety-prone Martha laments her plight, rather than realizing that her stress is self-appointed. Understood in this way, Martha is blaming Mary for causing the stress through her lack of assistance. Jesus uses two words—"worried" and "distracted." The term Luke uses for "worried" is one that means "to be pulled in different directions." The root verb in Greek means "to divide into parts." From the Hebrew Bible we read of a similar sentiment. "Give me an undivided heart that I may live in awe of your name" (Psalm. 86:11).

Can Martha be blamed? Normally, her younger sister (if she was younger) would be her right hand in this instance. According to all social norms, Mary should be helping Martha and any other women present to prepare a meal and prepare a room for Jesus to stay in. Moreover, it would be unheard of for a woman to sit at the feet of a teacher – this was the role of men. In many ways our understanding of this passage is a projection of our own postmodern experience.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan it was the one who acted justly that was praised by Jesus. Here, Jesus is perhaps saying that loving action is more important than religious ritual and tradition. That sitting in prayer, as the religious men who walked past often did, does not guarantee you are doing God's will.

John 11 gives further food for reflection. Lazarus the brother of Martha and Mary dies and is raised by Jesus from his tomb. Mary of Bethany described here is the same Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. Significantly, 'When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. [21] Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. [22] But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."' In contrast [32] 'When Mary arrived [at the tomb] and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.' This passage from John, shows Martha's understanding was possibly at a different stage futher than Mary's. Further, Martha knew Jesus was the Messiah. In the narrative, Lazarus is indeed raised, walking from the tomb in his shroud.

Luke, in writing his gospel, has set up an excellent discussion by placing the Good Samaritan and Bethany narrative side by side and John adds to this. Are we to assume that goodness comes from the contemplative life, sitting by God and listening, without concern for the pressing tasks of the world, or are we to assume that goodness comes from our actions, that our merit is a direct measure of or works? In the light of both the Martha and Mary story, and the preceding passage of the Good Samaritan, what is God telling us about the active and contemplative life? Perhaps by following in Mary's footsteps and the Samaritan's we need to pray and act. We must maintain our inner stillness while committing to outward effort.

Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans

Francis (1182 – 1226) took the story of Martha and Mary as a model when devising his 'Rule for Hermitages'. Each hermitage would be limited to three or four brothers, half of whom should serve as 'mothers' and follow Martha's example, while the two 'sons' should adopt the contemplative way of Mary. From time to time these complimentary and interdependent roles should be exchanged.

In Meister Eckhart

For Eckhart, Mary, the virgin-mother, is an archetype for the realized human being in whom two apparent opposites exist – virginal receptivity and motherly fruitfulness – are unified. Eckhart refers to these co-existing opposites as 'the virgin who is also a wife. So what of Martha? According to Eckhart, the fact that Christ names Martha twice in his response to her is significant. 'Martha, Martha' expresses the elder sister's spiritual completeness. The first 'Martha' reflects her 'perfection in temporal works,' by which Eckhart means embodied activity in time. The second 'Martha' refers to her relationship to eternity. For Eckhart Martha is more perfect than her sister, Mary of Bethany.

Eckhart's Sermon 86: Martha and Mary

In Sermon 86 'the virgin who is a wife' is personified in the character of Martha. Thus Eckhart elevates Martha over Mary as the ideal of spiritual maturity.

Eckhart lists three qualities in each sister that motivate their quite different responses. (1) Mary's soul was possessed by the goodness of God, (2) she was gripped by 'unspeakable longing' for something she did not yet understand, and (3) she found 'sweet solace and joy' in Christ's presence. Martha's actions were due largely to her mature age and that she had learned from life, which 'gives the finest understanding'. (1) 'The ground of her being was so fully trained that she thought none could do the work as well as she', (2) she had the wisdom to know how to perform outward works 'perfectly as love ordains', and (3) she recognized the 'great dignity' of her guest.

For Eckhart, Martha is bothered that Mary is indulging herself. When she says, 'Lord, tell her to help me,' it is not out of spite but out of concern that Mary might have continued to sit there 'a little more for her own happiness than for spiritual profit' (Proverbs. 86). Martha was worried that 'by dallying in this joy' her sister 'might progress no further.' Jesus reassures Martha that, despite appearances, Mary's heart is in the right place: she has 'chosen the best part' and will eventually grow into the fully grounded maturity that Martha desires for her. She has only just 'entered school' and begun 'to learn how to live'.

So what of Martha? According to Eckhart, Martha lives comfortably in two worlds. Happy to do whatever the moment calls for in time she is equally at home on what Eckhart calls 'the circle of eternity', a mature woman, perhaps able to take in the words of her teacher while also getting on with the chores of the world.

Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians

Renowned Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), preached a rich and complex allegory to convey his notion of the ideal of the 'mixed life', wherein action and contemplation are united in Mary, the virgin mother, a similar understanding to Eckhart. In Bernard's allegory the home of Mary of Bethany and Martha

is likened to Mary's womb. Each sister has a part to play: Martha, the pragmatic and active elder sister has the privilege of receiving the earthly Jesus, while the younger, Mary, prepares herself to receive the heavenly Christ. The busyness of Martha and the 'not idle leisure' of Mary are both united in the virgin Mary. While in the story Jesus credits the younger sister with have the 'better part', Bernard makes the point that the 'best part' belongs to the Virgin Mary, in whom the unity of the active and contemplative is perfected. The Virgin Mary's 'best' includes both Martha's and Mary's parts

Preparation for Meditation

We will now enter a period of meditation, reflecting that we are both together in this room, joining with others meditating at home and participating in the silence at the heart of creation, connected to the mystery of all that is. Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, you may wish to pay particular attention to the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word, you might notice its rhythm, perhaps noticing how your word is in time with the breath, or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. We Return to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes

After Meditation

Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, better things will take their place

"Now is the time to unite the soul and the world. Now is the time to see the sunlight dancing as one with the shadows"

"Apparently two, but one in the soul, you and I"

"I want your sun to reach my raindrops, so your heat can raise my soul upward like a cloud"

"My soul is my guide, for my soul is of that abode. I will not speak of the earthly: I am of the unknown"

(Sufi Poem)

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us; please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources:

1. Images 1: Unknown internet source



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.