

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(Genesis 18:1-10 / Luke 10:38-42)  
21.07.2019

Why is it that Mary “has chosen the better part?”

Is it just because she sat down at Jesus’ feet, while her sister was working hard?

That would be a bit unfair on Martha and on all those who have no choice but to work hard.

It seems to me that the problem of Martha is not that she is active while Mary is contemplative. The opposition between the two sisters is not between action and prayer.

The key word used about Martha and which helps us to understand why she has not chosen the better part is “distracted”. Martha was distracted while Mary was focused.

The strange thing is that it could have been the contrary: Martha could have been working hard and yet be focused on the guest whom she was welcoming and Mary, sitting of the feet of Jesus, could have been exteriorly quiet and silent and interiorly distracted by many thoughts, her mind wandering far away from where she was physically. In that situation who would have chosen the better part?

So we must be clear about the fact that in our story, Jesus is not simplistically opposing action and contemplation, work and prayer. The crux of the matter is whether or not we are Christ-centred. In the kitchen or kneeling in the Church the challenge is to remain intentional about what we do and why we are doing it.

Here come to mind the words of St Anselm who, when he arrived at the Abbey of Bec in 1059, declared: “There I shall have my rest, there God alone will be my intention” (*The Life...*, p. 10). St Anselm’s decision to fix his intention on God alone was a decisive moment in his life. And truly he remained faithful to this intention as a monk and, after 1093, as archbishop of Canterbury.

So what is our intention? What is it that orientates and gives meaning to our everyday life decisions, to everything we do or say? What is it that helps us to go through the ups and downs of life and sustains us when the journey is tough?

In our Gospel reading, Martha may have been tired and a bit overwhelmed. The problem is that she allowed her feelings and thoughts to distract her, she allowed them to lead her to lose sight of what was at stake in the situation. To be fair to Martha, we must acknowledge that it is difficult to be always clear about what really matters, to remain focused on the goal we have embraced. Maybe it has to do with original sin, but it seems that we are spontaneously scattered and that for us to be focused and intentional requires the help of divine grace as well as personal discipline.

From that point of view it is evident that if Mary chose the best part, she did not necessarily choose the easiest part because to listen to Jesus, and to remain Christ centred is not an effortless affair. That said we must remember that the effort towards centredness which is required of us is not a masochistic form of self-discipline. It is for our good. The novelist David Foster Wallace suggested that we need “to exercise some control over how and what we think” and be “aware enough to choose what we pay attention to”. And the philosopher Matthew Crawford comments: “Wallace is saying something important: the ability to direct our attention as we will is a basic condition for living well.” (*The World Beyond...*, p. 170) For us Christians, the challenge is not just to “direct our attention as we will” but rather to direct it on God and say with the psalmist: “My heart is fixed, O God, my

heart is fixed" (KJV 57:7), "in you alone is my soul at rest" (62:1).

In Martha we see that the first fruit of distraction and dispersion is anxiety. When our minds and hearts are not rooted in God this causes us to suffer from tiredness and stress. There is a form of restlessness which exhausts and drains our energy.

The second consequence is that like jugglers whose attention has to be directed to the many balls they are juggling in the air, the distracted person has to learn to focus on nothing and nobody but the thoughts which occupy his or her mind.

We see how Martha's distractions led her to a place where she became unable to connect with Jesus and Mary in an attentive way. A person who is always distracted becomes lonely.

Today in our society, and sometimes in our Churches, we have to acknowledge that the constant flow of new images, the ongoing blips from our electronic devices, and the requirement to multitask split our attention and generate stress and loneliness.

If we want to change something in this deadly dynamic, the challenge is to re-evaluate what our priorities are. It seems to me that it is absolutely necessary for us to reassess where we want to put our energy, and how we want to direct our thoughts.

In 1942, Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman killed in Auschwitz Concentration camp a year later, wrote in her diary: "Ultimately we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world." (29.09.1942, p. 267)

These powerful words should help us to get our priorities right. Everything begins "in ourselves" and there we should allow Christ who "is our peace" (Eph 2:14) to grow and to inspire words and actions in such a way that they produce peace everywhere. And here peace is not just a sweet and nice little word but a strong and powerful reality. While ongoing distraction generates anxiety and stress which cut us off from others, when peace is our guide and our intention then we become able to channel all our energies towards life and communion.

Wherever we are, whatever we do, today, with Christ, we can focus our minds and hearts on what really matters in our lives. Unlike Martha let us not allow our busyness, our thoughts and our feelings to distract us and to lead us on a war path with ourselves and with others. Let us seek, like Mary, to remain focused on Christ and be at peace.