

Frideswide Patronal Festival 2019

READINGS Acts 16: 11-15, Luke 10: 38-42 (Lydia, Martha and Mary),
The Dean, The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy

I hesitate to say this, but I think I might be able to resolve the tense riddle over Martha and Mary, and who choose the better part. My answer, perhaps surprisingly, comes from a Japanese Buddhist master called Do Hyun Choe.

*Stillness is what creates love,
movement is what creates life,
To be still
Yet still moving –
That is everything.*

I'm also reminded of David Whyte's work in his Book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*; where he tells us the speed is often, ironically, a symptom of complete immobility. We might say that the tension in this story rests on whether it is better to be mindful or helpful. Of course the minute you express it like that, you realise you need to be both: these are two sides of the same coin. Martha and Mary, like the proverbial coin, are authentically stamped with impressions. One sits still and was mindful of the Lord's teaching. The other scurries around, being helpful. Both are needed. Neither can be discarded.

Let me say something about mindfulness first. It's become a popular quasi-spiritual discipline in the last years of the new millennium, centring on the self, breathing, paying attention to the small details, and the registers inside and beyond our bodies. It is a traditional Buddhist practice, but it's worked its way into contemporary Christian practice. Of course, it had long been a tradition of Christianity, focused on attention and silences, paying attention to the breath and the life of the Spirit that pours through the pores of our bodies.

This practice is the very opposite of what Harold Bloom talks about in his idiosyncratic but stimulating study of American religion, in which he argues that America's real religious temperament is typically a mix of enthusiasm, Gnosticism and Orphism- this being 'an esoteric mystery cult', whose central tenet is the potential divinity and elevation of the elitist self.

A lot of contemporary spirituality is a form of Orphism, and focused on frantic activity, which can masquerade as anything from energetic pumped up praise, or extremely worthy investment in energetic social gospel practice.

Mindful religion in contrast makes you stop, be still, pause and think. It might take you to a place where you remember, and as all vocation, surrender.

Indeed, as I used to say to my students at Cuddesdon, a true vocation is essentially a giving up – the surrender of yourself, your hopes and ambitions. It is waiting patiently for the Lord, sometimes waiting patiently for salvation, sometimes waiting patiently for a sign of hope. But not despairing in the act of waiting, or even trying to hasten its end. Christian contemplative spirituality teaches you to wait – for what can seem like an eternity – know that God is with you in the moment, and even though there seems to be no help, support and salvation in the offing, you are not alone. You've not been abandoned.

I think Martha and Mary express two complementary but contrasting modes of worship and service, which are relevant to the saint we celebrate today, namely Frideswide. She had to run for her life in order to be still, she had to do a lot of work in building a convent in order to be free to be contemplative. She had to think and pray a lot, as the foundation for the mindful help that convent gave to others in acts of love and service.

Lydia too was a prototype. the early church that's built around her is rooted in her labour and enterprise without the energetic work of running a business, the early Christian church she seeded and sustained in its mindful worship and serve could not have been sustained. Mindfulness in action, are embodied in the character of her conviction and ministry.

So what does this have to say to us; gathered as we are for the feats of St. Frideswide. I'd like to suggest that our readings and our saint invites us into a work of mindful helping. Knowing that our Lord would have us serve. But also knowing that our Lord would have us be still, and know who God is.

I've be recently struck by two very powerful examples of this, written up by two authors who are not writing about Christian spirituality at all, but writing careful Christian ethnologies of how ministry is perceived and practiced.

The first of these is by Abby Day, the remarkable book in which she studies the lives of older Anglican women. She looks at how groups of women in ordinary Anglican congregation – whether that is a Mother’s Union or Women’s Institute bake for themselves and other with an always liturgical precision. It is one person’s job to make the dough, another sources the organic currants and cherries, another makes the marzipan; someone else does the baking and glazing. What is remarkable about this baking activity is the quality and depth of the pastoral conversation and caring mindful attentiveness to one another, that weaves its way through this group.

These women are baking – but it’s a profoundly caring community. The buns and the cakes they make go to others in the parish, who need the visit, or at least the excuse for one. For someone who is lonely or needs consolation. Yes, we all know it would be cheaper to buy the three for two offer in Tesco’s. But somehow the act of mindful attentive baking, contemplation and action combined, becomes a kind of Christian Bake Off. Put another way, it’s Martha and Mary in a bun.

I’ve been struck too by an article by Sunita Puri, who is a palliative care doctor. Perhaps obviously, she talks about being present with people who still hope even though they’re dying or rage and curse because they are. Or who sit with one finite mortal body after another, as they gradually disintegrate with the cancer they carry. The act of patiently, mindfully, actively being with the family and the loved ones who surround the person dying, is the very thing that prevents those families disintegrating. So the doctor gives practical help in all the ways you’d expect as a doctor. But brings contemplative, mindful presence as death draws near.

I’d like to think that Frideswide in her example, and the women we remember in tonight’s readings, teaches about the virtues of when to be still, silent and listen. And the no less worthy virtues of when to spring into action and do something. We all know in our lives and ministries about holding the tension between these two poles, on this feast day of Frideswide, we pray for the wisdom to hold these things together- when to be a Martha, or a Mary, or when to be as intentional as Frideswide and Lydia.

In all of this, we remember the profound Christian virtues, which the Beatles used on one of their best ever songs: Help! Not many people know this, but the original temp of the song is a slow ballad, and this makes the lyrics what they are – more of an anthem for the Samaritans than a piece of soft rock music for excitable screaming teenagers. Here are the lyrics – said slowly:

Help, I need somebody
Help, not just anybody
Help, you know I need someone, help
When I was younger, so much younger than today
I never needed anybody's help in any way
But now these days are gone, I'm not so self-assured
Now I find I've changed my mind and opened up the doors
Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
And I do appreciate you being round
Help me get my feet back on the ground
Won't you please, please help me
And now my life has changed in oh so many ways
My independence seems to vanish in the haze
But every now and then I feel so insecure
I know that I just need you like I've never done before
Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
And I do appreciate you being round
Help me get my feet back on the ground
Won't you please, please help me

Noel Gallagher, and perhaps surprisingly Tina Turner, and less surprisingly the Indian jazz guitarist Nitim Sawhney all play this song at the original speed – half that of the version we are used too – and do so as a melancholic soliloquy-anthem. And in so saying, and as Lennon and McCarthy wrote, Sometimes the help you need is Somebody, and not just Anybody. Pray that you then, will be a Frideswide, Martha, Mary or Lydia to somebody who needs you – either to be still be with them, or to get busy helping.