

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 17 July 2022

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Focus on Jesus

Have you read about Brother Lawrence and his book, “*The Practice of the Presence of God*”? Brother Lawrence was born Nicolas Herman in the region of Lorraine, located in modern-day eastern France. As a young man, Herman's poverty forced him into joining the army, which guaranteed him meals and a small stipend. Nicolas claimed an experience that set him on a unique spiritual journey during this period. He fought in the Thirty Years' War, and following an injury, he left the army and served as a personal servant. Nicolas entered the convent (a small monastery) in Paris as a lay brother, not having the education necessary to become a priest, and took the religious name ‘Lawrence of the Resurrection’. He spent almost all of his life within the walls of the convent, working in the kitchen for most of his life and as a repairer of sandals in his later years. Despite his lowly position in life and the priory, he had a reputation for experiencing profound peace and visitors came to seek spiritual guidance from him. That is, working in the kitchen or repairing shoes didn't prevent him from hearing God, which enabled him to continue contemplation of the word and action accordingly. In short, for him, there was no distraction from God.¹ This story is a good analogy to Martha and Mary's story of how they respond to Jesus. It also helps us understand Paul's exhortation to all Christians to be ‘in Christ’

The story of Martha and Mary has a few interesting things. For example, we can see how Luke describes women's roles as supporters and disciples in Jesus' ministry. When Martha receives Jesus into their home, the story centres on her and Jesus. Her sister Mary is also described as a disciple like other male disciples, even though she never speaks or enters the action. The radicality of the story is that Jesus is received into a woman's home, and he teaches a woman when Rabbis did not allow women to ‘sit at their feet’ as their disciples.

¹ The wisdom he passed on to others in conversations and letters became the basis for the book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Father Joseph de Beaufort, later vicar general to the Archbishop of Paris, compiled this work after Brother Lawrence died. It became popular among Catholics and Protestants alike.

Now Jesus visits a woman who is so busy serving. She does not hear the word, and Jesus offers her an example - her sister. But for Martha, it seems unfair as Jesus even defends Mary's action. It doesn't seem foreign to us as we may also experience a similar thing in the faith community. Martha seems very busy as she has extended hospitality to receive Jesus and his disciples. Her complaint is understandable, but Jesus' response to her anxiety is not fully clear. Greek manuscripts differ on v 42: Some read, "One thing is needful"; others read, "Few things are needful, or only one", without explaining what this 'one' is. But what draws our attention is in v 40. It reads, "*But Martha was distracted by her many tasks*"² The verb *perispao* literally means 'to be distracted/worried.' This imperfect, middle verb especially shows the state of her heart of Martha well. She cannot hear God because she is fully occupied with many tasks. As such, Martha asks Jesus to tell her sister Mary to help her. But Jesus points out that Mary chose a 'good one' which is to focus on hearing the word of God. As we can infer, 'a good one' doesn't only mean 'sitting at Jesus' feet' as his disciple. Sitting or standing, a good one is to pay attention to Jesus. So, what concerned Jesus is not about Martha's hospitality or Mary's inaction but 'distraction' from God, which may prevent Martha from focusing on Jesus – the word of God. It also corresponds to Paul's letter to the Colossians.

In his letter, Paul emphatically says that they are first and foremost in Christ; that was their most foundational identity. The identity in Christ, Paul urges, is more crucial than family, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. For Paul, 'focus on Jesus' is expressed in this phrase, 'in Christ.' The words 'in Christ' needs to be understood in the context of 'Pax Romana'³ where the emperor's preeminence is embedded and defended by socio-economic, political, and military structures. When Paul proclaims that 'all things in heaven and on earth were created through him and for him,' it means Jesus is the Lord of all lords, including the emperor. Now this Lord of all lords is also the head of the body, which is the church. In Paul's provocative claim, Jesus replaces Caesar and does the church – a little faith community in Colossae - replace the empire. As Christ is the head of the body, there is no distraction as the body may only respond to the head! What does this tell us today? What makes us distracted from focusing on Jesus Christ?

In our story time, the question was if Martha was happy again. The short answer is 'yes,'

² ἡ δὲ Μάρθα *περιεσπάτο* περὶ πολλήν διακονίαν

³ the peace which existed between nationalities within the Roman Empire.

because Martha's focus was redirected from many tasks to Jesus and his teaching. Later, Martha may have to ponder over Jesus' words, Mary's choice, and what this 'one good thing' was about. Martha may have continued to work to serve the guests while focusing on what Jesus said to her. As seen in the case of Brother Lawrence, we can focus on God in busyness as well as in our quiet time.

In our bulletin, we ask all of you to pray for GPP daily from 12-12.15 pm. The keyword for the centring prayer is 'GPP'. Fifteen minutes can be long if your mind is distracted by many things. But it can be very short if we intentionally focus on communicating with God for GPP's ongoing mission and well-being. As I have been practising this centring prayer already, I found that this mid-day prayer was quite refreshing. My eyes and mind became very clear after the prayer. I could focus on work with a fresh mind. I'm also trying to hear what God says to me during the prayer. For now, it is only a 15-minute centring prayer. But when we learn more about different forms of prayer on the 6 August in the prayer workshop, we will pray to God more often, which is the practice of the presence of God. Like Brother Lawrence, we will enjoy God's company in our lives while doing ordinary things prayerfully, which is what Paul means to live in Christ all the time. Amen.