

Tuesday 1st July 2008 – Clergy Conference 2008

Talk by The Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

Taken from www.norwich.anglican.org

Praying and Doing

Luke 10. 38 – 42



Christ in the House of Mary and Martha, Jan Vermeer

Taken from Olga's Gallery, www.abcgallery.com

My Vermeer painting for today is '*Christ in the house of Martha and Mary*', painted in 1654, which hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. I want us to meditate on Mary and Martha; on prayer and service.

Martha is sometimes thought of as the baddy – she is busy and anxious about getting the work done, while Mary is praised for sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. Sometimes, of course, that may be a salutary lesson - sometimes shere busyness does get in the way of the personal, intimate, spiritual, relational, loving aspects to life, and in that sense Mary has chosen the better part. But Martha's work has to be done, the dishes washed, the schedules completed, the PCC agenda sent out, the budget balanced, the roof repaired – and then the contemplative life can seem rather an expensive luxury.

I think we need both Martha and Mary; they are sometimes both part of us. Let us think of them as different ways of relating to the world around us – perhaps different levels of engagement with the world. God gives gifts of active service – we thank God for those who can do things. Often in our churches we would love to have people who can do things! We need activists. And we also need visionaries - those who keep alive the personal, relational, spiritual, meaning and purpose dimension, which can so easily get crowded out. Thank God for Mary and Martha, the prayers and the doers, the visionaries and the activists, the poets and the scientists, - those who catch the vision for Committed to Growth and those who ask 'who is going to pay for it?'

Yet that way of putting it would have seemed very strange to the earliest scientists and poets – people like Sir Edmund Halley who is buried near where I used to live in London. He was astronomer royal, and a poet. The contemplation of the heavens was as important as the discovery of the heavens. How to go to heaven as important as how the

heavens go. His scientific discoveries were linked to the worship and praise of God the creator.

There was for the earliest scientists no separation between science and faith, active engagement with the world and prayerful contemplation of God's works, between the facts of science and the values of religion.

But our world does divide things up.

When I was researching in organic chemistry at Kings College on the Thames Embankment, I did some work on X ray crystallography. I remember turning in one research report to my supervisor. In it I described some beautiful new crystals I had made. But he was not impressed 'Beautiful – that's not a very scientific word.' Of course in one sense he was right. Science is about seeking to be as objective as possible, and beauty, some say, is a subjective thing. But I was disappointed he could not speak about the beauty of the crystals in the same breath as their chemical structure. There was in him - as in many in our post-Enlightenment world – a split between the objective world of facts and the subjective world of values and beliefs. 'Scientific' means analyzable and factual in the public world; but things like moral values and religious beliefs - there are private matters for those who like that sort of thing. This split between science and faith, between the analytical and the purposeful, between Martha and Mary, is very deeply part of our culture.

Yet, once you separate the world of nature from God's creation; science from faith, facts from values, a great chasm opens in our culture down which go the words which are so important to Mary: intimacy, relationships, communion, purpose, love. These cease to be matters of public concern and are kept safely in the private sphere. And it is not too far down that road that individual will and individual choice become much more important than intimate relationships, fellowship, justice, society. We soon hear the phrase 'there is no such thing as society'.

How quickly political and cultural questions are affected by how we see the world. Are we a world of isolated individuals each with our own choices, own values own beliefs, or is this a world in which fellowship between people is possible, intimacy is important, personal loving relationships are at the centre of what life is about - in which social values matter, social justice is possible and there can be a shared public morality to which we can appeal.

Let me tell you two stories – one about personal purpose; the other about personal communion. Go into our kitchen and see the kettle boiling. 'Why is that kettle boiling - you ask'. I give you a scientific answer in terms of convection currents and vapour pressure. But there is an answer at a higher level - one that depends on the scientific answer but is not reducible to it. Why is that kettle boiling? Because Sue is making me a cup of tea. There is a whole level of purpose which depends on but is not reducible to physics and chemistry - a dimension which writers like Richard Dawkins simply fail to acknowledge. There is, of course, a higher level still - Sue is making me tea because I am very stressed writing this address for this conference, and she loves me.

My second story has been doing the round. The version I have heard refers to Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister. She was visiting an elderly persons' home and

got into conversation with one of the residents. Soon she realized that the person had no idea what was going on. 'Do you know who I am?' Mrs Thatcher is reported to have asked, and got the reply 'No, but ask Matron – she usually knows.'

Who am I? Who are we? How can I know you? At the level of analysis I could put you on a slab and find out what you are made of: enough water to fill several bottles, enough carbon to make leads for a few pencils, enough iron for a good sized nail, some calcium, potassium and so on. But would I know you?

I know you at a different level – my knowing you depends on us both taking the risk of letting ourselves be known. It is more vulnerable and painful. It means venturing into personal communion – and that is something though it depends on our physics and chemistry, cannot be reduced to them. This is Mary's level of personal knowledge, of love, of purpose, of commitment. It is these values which Mary keeps alive. We need Martha to provide the analysis and the activity. We need Mary to remind us what it is all for. Martha tells us that one form of engagement with the world is service; Mary reminds us that another is prayer. Let us thank God for both.

But if we have to prioritise, Mary, we read, has chosen the better part. She sits at the feet of Jesus where she sees before her the 'Love which moves the sun and the other stars'.