The art of listening to God

Saint Luke seems to have been fascinated by food! Even the Risen Lord asked the stunned disciples, “have you anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41). Luke recalls ten meals, each with a distinctive setting and a special message. The last supper and the welcoming banquet for the return of the Prodigal Son are the best-known meals. This Sunday’s Gospel (Luke 10: 38-42) features a meal in the house of his friends in Bethany.

The sisters, Martha and Mary, represent two ways of serving the Lord. Martha represents the active life, cooking the meal, helping, doing good for others. Mary represents the contemplative life, giving priority to sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to the word of the Lord. On that particular occasion Mary chose the better part. But there were other times when Martha’s contribution was more important. For instance, when their brother Lazarus died, Martha seems to have coped much better than Mary. There is a time for giving and a time for receiving. The contribution of each one finds a place in the liturgy of Mass. Like Mary, we sit and listen to the word of the Lord. Like Martha, we offer the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands. Both of them are celebrated as saints.

Last Sunday we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and Levite passed by the wounded man on their way to the prayer service in the temple, whereas the half-pagan Samaritan was moved with compassion and proved to be a loving neighbour. In that instance the active life was the more important part. But in today’s Gospel, Martha, the active sister is told: “You worry and fret about so many things, yet few are needed. Mary has chosen the better part.”

We worry and fret too much

What Jesus said to Martha might be said to many of us. For many people the development of their prayer has to begin with quietening the mind, making space for God in our time and attention. Often, our fears and anxieties are about things which are not all that important. We cannot see the forest because of the trees. Learn how to be quiet and still. The Lord said, “When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place.”

Learn how to trust, how to let go and let God. “Be still and know that I am God.”

Jesus is waiting for me at the well

There is a beautiful description of the prayer of listening in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The scene is the well in Samaria where Jesus chats with a local woman. “The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (Catechism, 2560).

For me, it was an eye-opener to read that my relationship with God doesn’t start when I put some time apart for it. God was already waiting for me. All he asked of the Samaritan woman was her empty bucket. All God asks of me is some empty time. There are 86,400 seconds in a day. How many do I set aside for God? I fret and worry about so many things, yet few are needed. The Catechism quotes from the prophet Jeremiah: “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and have hewn out cisterns for themselves that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13). Jesus, at the well,
asked the woman for her empty bucket. “Whoever drinks the water that I shall give will become a spring of water within, welling up for eternal life” (John 4:14).

**Learn to love the place of silence**

In this electronified, noisy, crazy, pressurized world of today, silence is a rare commodity. If it is possible to visit a church you will find a very quiet home. Search for that quiet place within yourself. Shut the door. Leave your distractions outside for a few minutes. Relax your breathing. The Lord is here waiting for you, thirsting for you. Just God and you. Listen, think, remember, pray. Value this time when you are alone with God. Remember, you are God’s work of art. You are precious in His eyes. God is with you. God is in you. Discover who you are. Learn to love this rich silence where you sit like Mary of Bethany at the feet of the Lord and listen to his word.

**Mother Teresa’s Business Card**

A great saint of our time, Mother Teresa of Kalkota, managed to combine the active service of Martha with the contemplative listening of Mary. As she became world-famous, many wealthy people would give her a business card with an address to call if she ever needed help. In return, she would give her own business card with the address of the spiritual wealth of peace. She called it her five-finger exercise.

The fruit of silence is prayer: the fruit of prayer is faith: the fruit of faith is love: the fruit of love is service: and the fruit of service is peace.

**Prayer**

O God, you are my God, for you I long;

for you my soul is thirsting.

My body pines for you

like a dry weary land without water.

So, I gaze on you in the sanctuary

to see your strength and your glory. (Psalm 62)