

May I speak in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

A few years ago I was living in Paris, and I used to pop into the many different churches of the city when I had a few moments. Very often I would see the same man sitting in the church pews. A young man with long black hair and a flowing beard, wearing a sort of white sheet and sandals. He always looked as though he'd been there for hours, and he sat staring the altar in a happy trance.

I often wondered about him, as I rushed back to work or home. Who was he, didn't he have a job to get to? And why was he dressed like that? But most of all, how come he looked so peaceful and happy – was he some kind of a wandering monk? He definitely stood out in the busyness of the city.

In today's famous story from Luke's Gospel, we are shown two different approaches to life: Martha and Mary. Two women, two ways of being. *One takes action. The other sits and contemplates.*

It's a simple story. Jesus passes through a village. A woman called Martha welcomes him into her home. Her sister Mary is also there.

Martha busies herself with preparations, we can imagine her tidying up, preparing food. By contrast, her sister Mary sits silently at the feet of Jesus, and simply watches and listens to him. Not asking, not speaking, not praying – just *contemplating*.

Martha is irritated. *Tell my sister to help*, she asks Jesus. But Jesus, very politely, suggests that Mary, by sitting quietly, by focussing on God, has chosen the better option.

On the face of it, this seems confusing – unfair, even!

Why should Martha, who is working, be told that Mary is the wiser one? Why can't Martha put her feet up while Mary helps? After all who wouldn't prefer to sit around contemplating, while someone else takes out the rubbish?

Jesus's suggestion seems to be one of *priorities*. Listening, contemplation comes first. Action, busy-ness come later.

Why is this scene relevant to *us*? How is God speaking to us today through this Gospel story?

Perhaps one way to find out is to ask: do we prioritise listening, contemplating, sitting with God – before we take action?

I can't answer for everyone here. But I know for myself, the answer is no, definitely not, always. I'm often just too busy.

And I'm sure I'm not alone. Because in today's world, especially in our big cities, reflection, silence, listening – these are not the things we prize.

In today's world, being busy is often to be seen as good.

All of us are encouraged to be *Marthas*. The vast majority of us need to be Marthas of course, in order to survive. But everyone is judged and rewarded on output and productivity, on the *impact* we have.

You would think churches might be exempt. But they are not. Churches too need to have 'action plans'. We need to pack the pews and if enough people don't turn up there must be a problem.

Perhaps it's not surprising that this busy-ness, this obsession with growth, seems itself to be expanding.

Sometimes it feels as though no corner of the world will be left untouched. Every bit of it must be managed or developed, tarmacked over or built upon and sold back to us at a profit. Everything can and should be ours for the managing and taking.

Likewise, every quest for personal human fulfilment must be satisfied, with no limits imposed on our mission to be God-like.

Now let us pan our camera back to Mary, sitting, surrendering, listening. Putting God first. Or to that man in those Paris churches who I never spoke to, but watched many times, as he sat staring at the church altars, seemingly doing nothing, apparently completely unproductive.

Who can say what effect such silences have on the world around us?

We cannot measure their effect, there is no data on their output.

But in this Gospel story Jesus clearly tells us that silence and listening should take priority over doing.

Thus does the story of Mary and Martha call out to us today, with renewed relevance. Reminding us of Mary's work -

Sitting quietly, lifting our hearts to God in silence, even for just a few seconds a day, before we go ahead with our busyness. As the Cloud of Unknowing puts it: "It is the work of the soul which pleases God the most. All the saints and angels rejoice over it, and hasten to help it on with all their might."

I'd like to end with this quote from the ecologist and writer Paul Kingsnorth. It underlines how important this approach could be today.

He has described the world we humans are busy building as 'The Machine'. And he contrasts it with what he calls the 'ancient faith' of Christianity.

This is from his essay, 'The Cross and The Machine':

In the Kingdom of Man, the seas are ribboned with plastic, the forests are burning, the cities bulge with billionaires and tented camps, and still we kneel before the idol of the great god Economy as it grows and grows like a cancer cell.

And what if this ancient faith is not an obstacle after all, but a way through?

As we see the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit, of choosing power over humility, separation over communion, the stakes become clearer each day. Surrender or rebellion; sacrifice or conquest; death of the self or triumph of the will; the Cross or the machine.

We have always been offered the same choice. The gate is strait and the way is narrow and maybe we will always fail to walk it. But is there any other road that leads home?

AMEN