

Dear all,

It seems strange at times that the Anglican calendar for Wednesdays seems to want us to celebrate/remember people for whom I have an affinity. Last week was Mary Magdalene: today we are directed to think about Mary, Martha and Lazarus-the sisters and brother whom Jesus loved.

Lazarus appears in John 11. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he didn't rush off to see (and heal?)him, but waited so that ,by the time he reached Bethany Lazarus had been dead for 4 days. This, like a lot of numbers in John, is significant. Jews believed that the spirit of a dead person hovers round the grave for 3 days - so Lazarus was well and truly dead. As you know, Jesus called "Lazarus, come out" and Lazarus came out of his stone cave/grave. It reminds us again that the sheep recognize the shepherd's voice - and once you have heard that, there is no going back is there?

And the importance of the Lazarus incident? It shows that Jesus has power over death and there is no evidence that Lazarus was a believer-but Jesus still raised him. Another thing for us to ponder! It also shows Jesus was not like an unemotional Greek god - he was truly human and divine. He loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus and 11:35 records "Jesus wept"(the shortest verse in the Bible)-again human emotion. And finally, the Lazarus incident sealed Jesus' fate. The pharisees said: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him" i.e. forsake Judaism. Caiaphas made that famous statement: "It is better for one man to die for the people than that a whole nation perish...from that day they plotted to take his life". You can't go around teaching, doing miracles etc - people might follow you!

And Mary and Martha? They can be found in Luke 10 and John 11. In Luke, Martha is the busy one, Mary the one who sits at Jesus' feet and is commended for it. In John, it's clear they both believe Jesus could have healed Lazarus if he'd been there, but perhaps the more significant thing about Martha in John 11 is that, once again, Jesus defied social convention-he met Martha alone and worse, he had a theological conversation with her. A theological conversation about life after death with a woman! Martha believed Lazarus would rise again at the Last Day- a traditional belief among some Jews. Jesus responded with the famous line -"I am the resurrection and the life". Martha then came out with the amazing statement; "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God" - an astonishing depth of understanding and a reminder to us that women have a brain and can debate theology!

I sometimes feel a bit sorry for Mary, because we admire doers not sitters. If everyone sat, nothing would get done - or is that just the way society views sitters and doers? In Luke, Jesus praised the sitting Mary who listened to Jesus' teaching: but in John, Martha served at the table, Lazarus sat, while Mary anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair(see last week's thought).The idea that Mary's is the better way is reflected in paintings and poetry. Here is part of a poem by Emily McAdams which reinforces that idea:

These days we live in a Martha world
Continually running to and fro
Fretting about so many things
Our frustrations begin to show.
So much to do, so little time
Not enough hours in the day
If we have a heart like Martha
It's essential we get away.....
As his light in this lost and dying world
We must always let it shine through
Lord, give us a Mary heart

But I prefer Charles Wesley's
Faithful to my Lord's commands
I would choose the better part
Serve with careful Martha's hands
And loving Mary's heart

So, are we a Martha? Or a Mary? Or a bit of both? Wesley said "Blessed are the balanced" so perhaps our aim should be to be a bit of both Mary and Martha. Not easy in a society which admires doers so much. "We must do something. Here is something so let's do it" I once worked in a school where action was the highest ideal. Pupils were not really encouraged to write in class - they could do that at home. They sat at the master's (mine) feet absorbing the pearls of wisdom. One member of staff had it down to a t. He would rush around school with a brown folder under his arm, looking busy. We all knew he never did anything! - but looked busy. I digress! Which are you Martha or Mary? There's a thought for the day!

God bless and keep safe

Jeff

