

Luke 10: 38-42

This week we look at the fourth of 8 meals in Luke's Gospel, the story of Martha and Mary, which are General Secretary, Jonathan Edwards, preached on a few weeks ago here at Bloomsbury. Well, having read this story – I agreed with him, that there was a little more to it than the conclusion that Prayer is more important than housework! It comes within the context of a story, for one thing, which must be heard. And having done this, you can see how Jesus transgresses social expectations – and the challenge is whether we can cope when our precious boundaries and values and principles and morals are transgressed by God himself. Well, I thought that was quite clever. The trouble is, that there is a phrase in this story that I wish wasn't there. I try to ignore it. I try to make it go away. But it echoes like a gentle rebuke through my attempts at cleverness. "You are anxious and troubled about many things."

The Messiah has come to your village, and is visiting your house for tea. Now the one thing that you can do, and do well – is to offer hospitality. And so you are rushing around trying to get everything ready, trying to offer the hospitality fit for a king. And as you are running around trying to prepare everything, the one person upon whom you are sure you could rely, is sat on her back side basking in the wisdom of a man who is desperate for a cup of tea.

Of course, you'd love to be sat listening to him, and to have someone else do all the running around for you. But you actually care about the wider situation, you are the only one behaving responsibly, and doing what a good woman should do. Your lazy sister should be helping – it is just plain wrong.

And let's be clear. It is not simply that you like preparing food. It is not simply that your nose is out of joint because you're not getting any help. Your god-given role is to provide, your god-given gift is to do it well. And this is the Messiah. Your sister shares this god-given responsibility... and her laziness is just plain wrong. You don't need to ask Jesus whether or not her behaviour is acceptable. You know that it is not, so you have no qualms saying to him, "tell her to come and help!"

Then, in a comprehensive display of Messianic pastoral insensitivity, this Man – and you can almost hear the infuriating and smug calmness of his voice – this man says, "Martha – Martha – you are anxious and troubled about many things." How on earth would you react to that? "Martha – You (forget Mary), You, are anxious and troubled about many things. How would you feel if you were Martha? Instead of supporting you – he exposes your character, humiliating you in front of a crowd of people. "You, are anxious and troubled about many things."

Trying to put ourselves in Martha's position, what are the 'many things' about which she was anxious? We don't have the impression that there is a list. Martha has a legitimate list of worries that other people don't have. No – it is not the 'many things' that Jesus is talking about. It is how Martha deals with the many 'things' that Jesus exposes. She is anxious and troubled. Clearly one of these many things, is the fulfilment of social expectations – the fussing to offer hospitality. And failure to fulfil these expectations, and play these roles, is the cause of anxiety, and worry and trouble. It is not particularly the list of troubles that Martha faces that bothers Jesus – it is rather Martha's state of anxiety, that would cause her to be troubled probably not only by these many things, but by any-things!

It was the anxiety and the trouble that clearly prevented Martha from recognising the one thing that is necessary. And, if Jesus were stood amongst us today, if Jesus came to our house for tea, if Jesus looked us in the eye today – I suspect that Martha would not have been the last person in history to hear the words, “you are anxious and troubled about many things.”

Of course, we don't know what Martha's many things were. Of course, we live in a different world. And in our culture, there is a profound paradox at work. On the one hand – if there is one thing we don't want people to think of us, it is that we are worriers! We like people to think many things about us – but what we do not want them to think, is that we are anxious and troubled about many things. On the other hand, our culture, our politics, our economics, our marketing all based upon what one writer has called ‘a culture of fear’. Fear is the basis of our cultural identity.

I have to confess, that be it in sporting competitions, or in personal life, or in professional life – if we want to be successful, we cannot allow anyone to think that we are driven by any kind of fear. If you want to be an Alpha Male – fear is not in your vocabulary. You might even wear a logo with the phrase ‘No Fear’, which says more than it intends. My success in the quest to be Alpha Male, is largely determined by my ability to show no fear. And yet – I think it's fair to say that many of my friends are alpha-male types, and their lives are gripped by deep-seated socially acceptable fears.

Now at some superficial level, fear is acceptable for Alpha males. Usually the kind of fear that really shows courage. In one of the worst examples of shallow dialogue in 1990s cinema, Kevin Costner's character in the Bodyguard, is asked – “what are you afraid of?” And this all-action, superhuman, body-guard of a hero confesses his fear, “not being there!” Being unable to protect! Now you can't help but question the emotional intelligence of that kind of answer when we hear it – But it's not only Hollywood.

I have a friend who is a senior military officer – and ticks many of the boxes for Alpha maleness: But I have enormous respect for this man. Because he sat with me, and told me with brutal honesty the things that worried him. And it has stayed with me as a true display of what it means to be a strong man. The things that worried him, were the same things that worry my little boys. Underneath all the success and the wit and the confidence and the character, was a vulnerable, human being, aware of the fragility of his life and his dependence upon others – a fine example of good, Christ-centred self-awareness.

But it is rare, in a culture driven by fear it is rare. And this is true in whatever sphere of society we look. Like sex, fear is something that sells, it is a primal human reaction that can be readily accessed by marketers and politicians alike. If you look at the way that marketing works, it is worth remembering that the more we have, the more afraid we become of losing it. The nicer your car, the more afraid of getting it scratched. The trendier your wardrobe, the more vulnerable you are to those who command you to be cool by buying their product. And so marketers know exactly how to exploit our fear, for their benefit, and you can be assured that when this is something that is tapped into, it has an affect upon the way that we encounter the world. If you don't buy this safety product you are a bad parent, if you don't buy your parents this gift, you are a bad son or daughter. If you don't do what we are telling you to do – then you have reason to believe that you are not doing well, or being good, or succeeding.

But if it's true in Marketing it is equally true in politics. Fear is used constantly. I suppose the obvious example was the intention held by the Bush Administration long before 2001, to

deal with Iraq. When Al Quaida committed this horrific atrocity, Bush was forced to admit that Saddam Hussein had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with it. And yet, if you listen to almost every speech on terrorism, Saddam's name was mentioned in the same sentence as 9/11, constantly. Over and over and over. Until it sounded as though Saddam Hussein was a serious threat to the United States – justifying the war that ensued! 9/11 was a blank cheque for foreign policies based upon 'hitting them before they hit us'. And the war won popular support because of the irrational fear of terrorism – which resulted in one man being dragged before the CIA because he had been reading an article with the headline – Weapons of Mass Stupidity. He was reported by someone else in the coffee shop! Fear is not only a primal instinct, but a public duty.

In the end, fear gives way to angst. Fear is when you have a specific object to be worried about: an exam, an illness, an enemy. Angst is when you get the same emotion, but you cannot identify the specific object of that emotion. You're afraid, but not sure why or what of.

And in a culture such as ours, it is highly likely that Martha is not alone, when she is anxious and worried about many things. It is not the many things that count – it is rather that this incident of hers is deeply telling. There is a set of expectations that she must measure up to in order to be a proper human being. She isn't simply upset because her sister isn't helping her get the food ready. She is upset because her sister is not doing what is right – she is not fulfilling her role.

And Jesus says to Martha – you are anxious and troubled about many things – but only one thing is needful. You know, I wish he'd said what it was! But just picture the scene. It is clearly living devotion to this Jesus that relativises every other demand, every other expectation, every other principle. Seek first his kingship, and his justice, and all the other stuff will be looked after. Where your treasure is, that is where your heart is – so store up for yourselves treasure that does not rust and can't be stolen.

Mary has chosen the better way – and what she has will not be taken from her. This is why Paul is utterly convinced that there is nothing, neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It may sound rather lame simply to say, love Jesus, and all your fears will go. That's not it. It is rather that when your life belongs to this Jesus, then the fear that would otherwise drive us, finds its proper place in our daily life.

Our identity is not rooted in the fears that would drive us, it is not rooted in the cultural expectations that force us to comply. Our identity is rooted in the worship of this Jesus. Sitting at the feet of this Jesus.

Adrian Plass tells the story of a Christian speaker at some major conference, standing up and saying: Why do Christians worry? What have Christians got to worry about when you belong to God. Why worry when you belong to God? I don't. Who do I belong to – well yes it's God of course and because of that I don't have to worry... and he came of the platform and the first thing he said was "I'm really worried – I don't think I'm getting through to that lot at all ..."

We live in a culture that is largely defined by fear. Fear provides the basis for business, government, and personal advancement.

Anxious

Not taken away from her... what is it that will not be taken away from us

End: What kind of hospitality can you really offer?