

Reading: Luke 10:38-42

St Luke's

Jesus wants a life-giving relationship with you and me. He gives our life direction and purpose.

Our Gospel has Jesus going into Martha's Home. She has a sister named Mary who is sitting at Jesus feet listening to him. But Martha, distracted by so many tasks, gets angry with her sister for not pulling her weight, so she tries to get Jesus to tell her off. Rather, and with a smile in his voice, he names Martha as the distracted worried one and praises Mary for choosing the better part.

What are we to make of this story? Firstly, it's good to look for the surprises. We brush over it, but Luke the Gospel writer is careful to tell us that this is Martha's home. She owned it. Women seldom owned property. Secondly it is Mary who sits at Jesus' feet. Again, this was a role traditionally performed by men. Men sat at their rabbis' feet. Sitting at someone's feet is Bible speak for listening and learning. Thirdly we know the sibling rivalry has got pretty intense when Martha isn't even using Mary's name and is getting a third party to tell her off.

Anyone who has ever had someone important to stay will know the pressure it can put on a household. This one family was having the bishop for dinner. Everything had been nicely arranged and the mother turned to little Susie when it was time to say grace. She wanted to impress the bishop with how well they were bringing up their child. "I don't know any graces," Susie said. "Just say what I said at lunch dear," said mum. So, Susie intoned, "O God I do wish the bishop wasn't coming for dinner." Jesus is in no way undermining the importance of hospitality or of our tasks, but I think the key is the word distractions.

I once read a book about time management. It was written by a man who had headed up America's space program. They had one goal, and that was to put a person on the moon, everything else had to fall in line around that one goal. So, in the little book, (I didn't have much time to read it!) he develops the concept of ant stomping and elephant hunting. Elephant hunting is going after the big items the things that really need doing. The one thing in your day that gives everything else meaning and purpose. Ant stomping is chasing around hopping on the tiny insignificant things of which there are thousands and which, once they are stomped on, really make no difference at all.

For Christians, the elephant hunt is a life-giving relationship with Jesus. Jesus offers us his love, his care, and this gives our life meaning and purpose. This is our elephant hunting goal. When we know Jesus' love and care for us, this gives our life and everything we do meaning and purpose. Without a life-giving relationship with Jesus, we find ourselves ant stomping. Mary is the one in the story listening carefully to Jesus, because this gives her life direction. Martha is the one ant stomping.

Our way of listening to Jesus is prayer. I find that when I open my day in prayer God gives me little nudges about what's really important on that day. In fact, I keep a journal beside my prayer space. To write down what I need to do and what would just be nice to do. There is never any shortage of things that would be nice to do but if I listen carefully God gives me things to do which are elephants rather than ants. Being silent with Jesus isn't an alternative to doing things, it's a way of us learning what are the right things to do.

Let me give you an example. The day after the stabbing in Cheyenne Street I was praying, and I felt pushed to go and visit on the street. Naturally I don't like cold calling, it's really hard to do, but I did go, and I like to think that was one of the things God would have me do that day.

Spiritual writers talk about 'the flow'. To pray is to put ourselves in 'the flow' of God's grace. When we are in 'the flow' we can be at peace knowing that what we are doing is the right thing for that day. Ironically the more time I spend in prayer the more I seem to get done. Martin Luther is quoted as saying "I have so much to do today I need to pray for three hours!"

So how to begin? There is no better way than to imagine yourself in the Gospel. Imagine yourself sitting with Jesus. You could even have an empty chair beside you and imagine him sitting there with you. What does it feel like having Jesus sitting with you. What does he say to you? What would you want to say to him?

The story is told of an old man who was very ill, and the family called for the vicar. As she entered the sick man's bedroom and went to sit down, she noticed another chair on the opposite side of the bed, a chair which had also been drawn close. The vicar said, "Well Donald, I see I'm not the first visitor today."

The old man looked up, puzzled for a moment, then recognised from the nod of the head that the vicar was talking about the empty chair. "Well vicar," the man said, "many years ago I was finding it hard to pray, so I shared the problem with the vicar. He told me not to worry about kneeling or placing myself in a pious position but 'just sit down, put a chair opposite you, and imagine Jesus sitting on it, then talk to him as you would a friend.'" The aged man added, "I've been doing that ever since."

A short time later the daughter of the man called the vicar. She explained that he had died very suddenly, and she was quite shaken.

"I had just gone out for an hour or two and came back and found him dead." Then she added. "Except now his hand was on the empty chair at the side of the bed. Isn't that strange?" The vicar replied, "No it's not strange, I understand."

May we learn to pray and seek the guidance of Jesus and find meaning and purpose each day for our lives too.