

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME [C]

Genesis 18: 1-10

Colossians 1: 24-28

Luke 10: 38-42

I'm sure you all know the old saying: 'Familiarity breeds contempt:' you may even have wondered where it comes from.

Well, thanks to the wonders of a certain internet search engine, I can tell you!

It originates from the moral of 'The Fox and the Lion' story in Aesop's fables.

'When first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the wood. Next time, however, he came near the King of Beasts he stopped at a safe distance, and watched him pass by. The third time they came near one another, the Fox went straight up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family was, and when he should have the pleasure of seeing him again; then turning his tail, he parted from the Lion without much ceremony.'

Familiarity breeds contempt....

The lion is known as the King of Beasts; Jesus: "The Lion of the tribe of Judah has won the victory." Rev. 5: 5 over Satan, the prince of this world.

We have the Lord's word for it: "Now [He says] the prince of this world will be driven out.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jn. 12: 31 - 32

Lifted up on the Cross; lifted up from death by the power of the Holy Spirit; lifted up to be with His Father, interceding for us before the Throne of Grace.

So how is it that we've let Jesus and His message become so familiar to us that, like the fox in the fable, we turn our tails and walk away from Him without much ceremony?

His message that, as Paul says: "Was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to God's people." Col. 1: 26

We're those people: "And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory." Col. 1: 27

And yet I wonder if you - if I - can, hand on heart, say we believe we will share the Lord's glory?

The meal Jesus has at the house of Mary and Martha is, I think, one of those 'familiarity breeds contempt' moments.

One of those Gospel stories we've heard so often that we don't listen to what Jesus is saying to us through it.

Rather like Martha in the story: but she listens to Jesus telling her not to get caught up so much in what she's doing that she forgets she should be doing it all for Him.

She listens, and learns the lesson; and we know that from John's Gospel.

Later, when Jesus returns to their house because Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother is dead, He puts this question to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"

Jn. 11: 25 - 26

And she says to Jesus: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." Jn. 11: 27

Martha had listened to the Lord; but it's not a simple 'hearing;' it's a listening based on paying attention, a welcoming, an openness toward God.

It isn't like Aesop's fox: it isn't the distracted manner that we sometimes have when dealing with the Lord, or other people, when we hear their words, but don't really listen.

I'm sure Martha was always the sort of person who had to be doing practical things; and there's nothing wrong with that at all

Someone far wiser and holier than I - Pope St Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome in the 6th. Century - explained this story of Martha and Mary really well.

He said that: "The two women signify two dimensions of the spiritual life. Martha, the active life as she busily labours to honour Christ. Mary, the contemplative life as she sits attentively to listen and learn from Christ." Pope St Gregory the Great: Moralia 2; 6

He's not saying, as I've heard this passage preached on in the not too distant past, and read the other day in a Catholic commentary on Scripture, that Mary's chosen by far the better option through embracing the contemplative life.

I don't believe that's the essential meaning of this passage at all; because the message Jesus brings is for all people, in all times, and in all walks of life.

True, some are called to the contemplative life: but what about the vast majority of us who aren't?

Are we somehow to be forever second-class citizens in the Christian life?

Paul, in the Letter to the Colossians, gives an emphatic 'no' to that question.

He writes that Jesus has given him the commission to preach salvation:

"To present to you the word of God in all its fullness - the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to [you] his saints." Col. 1: 25 & 26

And the message is simple, amazing, and life-changing. It is that:

"God has chosen to make known the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Col. 1: 27

At the heart of Christ living within us is that, as Christians, we bear in our lives, as individuals and as the Church, His sufferings for the salvation of the world we live in.

This is Paul's great insight, where he says in Colossians that: "In my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church."

Col. 1: 24

Not that, somehow Jesus didn't suffer enough on the Cross, so that we have to seek out suffering to make up for what's lacking in His once, and perfect sacrifice on the Cross.

Simply through Jesus living within us, we take His redeeming love and presence into our homes, our families, our work, our relationships.

Wherever we are, He's with us and in us.

If that's so, then we can't say that one way of life is better than another within the Church.

Of course, there are things that Christians can't get involved in; certain types of life-style and behaviour, but not that being a contemplative is better than being married with a family or living the single life.

There are times for all of us when we have to be active, and when we need to be contemplative, in our following of the Master.

So I think we need to listen to what Jesus actually says to Martha.

He isn't telling her to stop being welcoming, hospitable, and open-hearted.

No: He's telling her not to let the practical things she has to do distract her from being attentive; being focussed on what He, the Lord, is saying.

He's asking her to learn that worship begins with silence and listening; even when the mundane, everyday things have to be done.

Both Martha and Mary, in their different traits of character and spirituality, are listening to the Lord: and don't we, too, need to do the same?

We must listen to God who speaks to us in the silence of our hearts, and in the everyday reality of our lives.

Listening to the Lord, because He's at the door in our lives, and He calls in many ways, putting signs along the roadmap of our life, and giving us the ability to see Him, and hear Him, through them - if only we would open our eyes and ears to Him.

"Listen! [says the Lord] I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends." Rev. 3: 20

As we share this sacrificial meal of the Eucharist, in which we feed on Jesus, may He give us the grace to open wide the door of my life, and yours, for Him.