

In the bustle and in the breathing... Love brings life



Well, it has been a busy weekend, one way or other, rushing about with flowers, food and tables, games, raffles, tombola, ... and love and prayer... to welcome the community, and to share together some of the goodness God pours so richly upon us. To sit and talk together, listening to what is on each other's hearts. To wonder at the beauty of music, and of flowers, and to give thanks.

Abraham had a similar experience in our first reading today. There he was, sat in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day – which might be something we can identify with after recent weeks – when three men come along– and he's off like Usain Bolt from the starting blocks – *running* to meet them, *hastening* to the tent to speak to Sarah, *running* to the herd, and giving a calf to the servants to *hasten* to prepare it.

And then he stops. He sets the food before them and stands, waiting near them whilst they eat.

The rushing and the waiting are both parts of Abraham's loving. His willingness to disturb himself, to move with all haste to share love with others is important, making his visitors welcome, wrapping them in love, sharing with them the goodness that God has given him in herd and hearth. Jesus tells us whenever we feed the hungry,

visit the sick, love the lonely, we are loving him, himself. And yet, if he hadn't been sitting still in the entrance to his tent, just waiting and watching, he may not have seen his visitors at all. Waiting with them whilst they ate, led to a message of hope and encouragement from God, a message he might have missed had he not stopped to be attentive and present.

But in all this, there is someone missing. "Where is your wife, Sarah?", ask the visitors. We know from later in the story that Sarah is listening to every word that is said, but social convention keeps her from standing with Abraham and being in the presence of these visitors. Her place is in the tent, preparing the bread, keeping the kitchen.

We have the same story with Mary and Martha in many ways. A story of activity and hospitality and welcome, and a story of sitting and waiting, listening and attending.

But as usual, wherever Jesus is, things are not as we expect them to be. Barriers are broken down, and questions raised. There is a ripple of consternation in this story that was much more hidden in the story of Abraham.

Martha is in the kitchen, serving,
and Mary is
... not.

She is sitting at the Lord's feet, listening to him talk with his disciples. Martha is concerned that Mary will be judged for taking her place seated at the Lord's feet, the place for male disciples, not for women. Women should be like Sarah, away from sight, listening round corners, in the effective tent.

Martha challenges Jesus to acknowledge this, before everyone starts gossiping about her sister – trying to nip things in the bud, she says "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do the work all by myself?"

But Jesus affirms Mary's right to be there, to be the person she is, giving the response to Jesus that comes from her heart. Just to sit, and give him her full attention, and sink her roots down into the wells of his wisdom.

It isn't that Mary is right, and Martha is wrong; nor that Martha is right and Mary is wrong. Here, Jesus simply affirms their right to be who they are at that moment in time. To respond to him in the way which flows from their hearts, each to their own gifts. Jesus does gently rebuke Martha, but not for serving and working in the kitchen. Simply for being distracted – for allowing her worries about what other people will think of her and of her sister to stop her joy in being who she is, and indeed who her sister is.

In fairness to Martha, sometimes the world is a tricky place to negotiate. We can all be worried and distracted by many things. There is always a current of anxiety in the world, in the church, worrying about what we should be doing, or not doing,

different pressures. And I feel Jesus smiling on Martha, giving her the freedom to be herself, and to love in the way that God has kindled in her heart, and encouraging her to allow others to do the same.

Because together we make a tapestry of gifts, each in our ways, each at different times, offering what comes from our hearts for love.

Truth is, we need hospitality and service. Sometimes we even need to move with haste to pour out love on our Lord, as we find him in those around us. And we also need to stop and to listen, to be attentive. To soak in his company, to learn how to see his face in all those around us.

Without the rooting, the rush becomes empty bustle, and can lead to stress on our hearts, and resentment and strain in our relationships. And without the moving, our attentiveness can lead to self-absorption, leaving others needful or even unobserved.

Our activity is always more fruitful if it flows from time spent sitting and attending upon each other and the Lord. And being alert and attentive to God shapes us his way of sharing love as it is needed by those around us. To being aware of who is, and who is not included. To be ready to challenge, or downright ignore, the boxes and prejudices of society, to allow every person to shine in the individual grace that God has given them.

And so, I give thanks for what we share here in this place together week by week, not just on this festival weekend. For times when we are attentive to God in all our forms of worship, and in conversation and groups where we share exploration. I give thanks for time spent with each other in coffee mornings, seeing the Lord in each other's faces, - and in the love and care we show each other and those around us week by week and day by day. And I give thanks too, for the rising energy, as we hasten to serve each other, the Lord and our community. For all the acts of service that flow into and through this place continually in so many ways – in cleaning, in cups of tea, in social events and eco work, in welcome and visiting and warmth of love, in the small tasks that go un-noticed that keep this place alive, and that reach out to those around us.

I pray that we continue to listen, gaze and wonder - to root deeply - for it is there we learn to see the face of God, and to know how we are called to respond to his love.

I pray from that love of God, we continue to overcome boundaries and challenge prejudice. To hasten to love those God sets around us in acts of love and service and to draw out those who are trapped in tents of worry or limits of fear, that we may all flourish to be the people God intended us each to be.

I will surely return to you in due season, says Abraham's visitor, and your wife Sarah shall have a son. Sarah, suddenly, like Mary, drawn from the shadows, and made part of the story.

Because that's what God does.

She shall bear a son, says the angel.

In our worship, in our loving, our family will grow for the Lord.

Thanks be to God