

# Anxiety & the Good Share

a sermon preached on the

## 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Amos 8:1-12, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42

To begin with, we can dispense with a superficial argument, whether prayer or works is the better in the life of faith. Or, to employ their more formal terms: contemplation versus action. Or, as the question which seems to have long-troubled the disciples of Christ: must I choose between love of God and love of the world?

It should be clear enough that, God having made the world, the question itself is misguided. Likewise, it should be clear enough that contemplation and action are equally vital, necessary paired opposites. Without action, contemplation floats off into the clouds. Without contemplation, action is superficial and trivial, without ground or centre. Contemplation and action are like breathing in and breathing out – without the one there is no oxygen to fire creative action; without the other action becomes poisoned by a build-up of carbon dioxide.

So in meditating upon Jesus' visit to Martha's home let us free ourselves from needing to settle such a false argument one way or the other. I suppose the question has always been of such importance to Jesus' followers because we do indeed desire to follow him. We do want to be faithful to the calling of our baptism. We are aware that the "harvest is plentiful and the labourers few".<sup>1</sup> We do want to become what we eat in the Eucharistic mystery – to become the Body of Christ. We do know that there are so many ways in which we lose heart in striving to "enter via the narrow door"<sup>2</sup> to salvation – and therefore require some form of structure to life, containment by prayer and works. And as the world becomes more complex, and as the Christian faith appears to become less relevant to it, we latter-day followers of Jesus become increasingly anxious about our place in the world.

It is worth noting that Martha is chastised not for the works she undertakes – but for being *anxious*.<sup>3</sup> Anxiety about our task is the spiritual problem. Now there is a little word play in today's story, a piece of alliteration which hidden in English translations and only accessible, however, to the Greek speaker-listener. The word translated into English as 'anxious' is *μεριμνας* *merimnas*. Martha is chastised for *meri-mnas*. Keep in mind that sound 'meri'.

At the centre of the Great Thanksgiving prayer in the Eucharist is what the Greek 'fathers' called the *αναμνησις* *anamnēsis* – the Greek is literally *αν-αμνησις* 'un-amnesia', that is, un-forgetting. Such a term reveals a profound insight about our nature – that we are all subject to dis-integration, the breaking apart of an initial state of integration. We are all subject to individual and collective amnesia. We forget who we are, and whose we are. Both individual and collective amnesia stands between us and our true nature.

The task of faith, indeed the task of human life, is the return to our true nature. How do we *do* that, we wonder? The disciples' task, according to St Paul, is "to present every person completed (*τελειον* *teleion*) in Christ."<sup>4</sup> The end, the *telos*, the completion, of human nature is to be in

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:2  
<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:24a  
<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:41  
<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:28

Christ, who "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... himself before all things, and in him all things hold[ing] together."<sup>5</sup> This work of completion of our humanity, according to Paul, requires that we 'fill up the fullness', literally Paul's expression (*ανταναπληρω antanaplērō*), of what is lacking in Christ's afflictions in our own bodies.<sup>6</sup> Christ's sufferings are to be filled up to fullness in us! This work of completion is accomplished through suffering the reconciliation of all things<sup>7</sup> which, according to our subjective judgement of course, seem implacably opposed to each other. That is to say, all reality is cross-shaped – and in the cross Christ's fullness is filled up to completion in us.

The effect of this can be summarised thus: the human vocation is the return to our Christ-like nature; which exists in the Divine from before time and existence; and which is made full, complete, through suffering the reconciliation of all opposites; which is the peace that passes all understanding that is the cross. In the face of such a paradoxical, non-rational truth, how apt is Jesus' thanksgiving prayer, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit: "for you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Paul declares that the mystery which had been hidden from before time had now been revealed.<sup>9</sup>

The secret, the mystery, is that both action and contemplation work towards the completion of the human vocation *when both are relinquished*. The union with God that we desire is attained when we strive for completion and yet simultaneously relinquish even this striving. Thus we are free from all attachments, including our attachment to our prayers and to our good works. Even our attachment to loving God and serving God can be a distraction which produces anxiety! Of course there's nothing wrong with either our prayers or our good works – necessary to the evolution of consciousness which is the unfolding of salvation. But even these must be relinquished in order that we un-forget our union in the Divine from before time and existence.

Remember that there is an alliterative word play in the Greek text. What is at the root of amnesia? Anxiety, *meri-mnas*, which causes us to grasp. With what does Jesus contrast this deadly *meri-mnas*? He says that Mary has the 'good share', or 'part' – the Greek word is *μεριδα merida*. This share is, as the sacrament of Eucharist declares, the un-forgetting, the un-amnesia, the anamnesis which liberates us from the death-like grip of *meri-mnas*, anxiety (*μεριμνας merimnas*).

*Meri-mnas* must give way to *meri-da*. Anxiety which causes the disciple to grasp, preventing the disciple from sharing in union with the Divine, must give way, be relinquished, in order that the disciple may un-forget union in the Divine from before time and existence - un-forget into the share in Christ's union with all things from before all things.

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<sup>5</sup> Colossians 1:15a, 17  
<sup>6</sup> Colossians 24  
<sup>7</sup> Colossians 1:20  
<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:21  
<sup>9</sup> Colossians 1:26