

**“The mystery is Christ in you.”**

***Col 1:27***

Most of us probably have some sympathy with Martha. Here she is, doing exactly the right thing by her guest, cooking, laying the table, getting everything ready to feed Him, indeed doing all that the laws of hospitality demand. The *last* thing she can do is to sit down and listen to her guest. Mary, on the other hand, is just sitting there, doing nothing to help, and blissfully unaware of how resentful Martha is getting. We’ve all heard this story many times, and have listened to many sermons on it. We all think we know what it’s really about: it’s about giving priority to prayer instead of activity, isn’t it? Well, yes and no. St Paul, in today’s second reading, gives us a clue about the Gospel passage. He says, ‘The mystery is Christ in you.’

There are two things especially to note. First, Our Lord does not complain about Martha’s busyness. We all *think* that that’s what He is talking about, but look closely. Martha is busy for ages without Our Lord saying anything about it. He only says anything when Martha starts to complain about how unhelpful Mary is being. In other words, Our Lord does not rebuke Martha because she is busy but because she fails in charity towards her sister. In many cultures – in Palestine in the time of Our Lord, then as now – good hospitality means far more than we usually think of it as being. The secret to just how important hospitality is can be gauged by looking at today’s first reading. In countries where great heat combines with desert landscapes, and where wells and resting places are few and far between, the stress was, and still is, on being generous towards guests, be they strangers or friends, foreigners or neighbours. In an age when there were no service stations, *not* to extend generous hospitality was unthinkable and unforgivable, not least because you never knew when you might have to

go on a journey and need someone else's help. No, Our Lord certainly recognized the importance of what Martha was doing for her guests. He knew her work was essential.

Hold that thought for a moment.

Last week we heard the story of the Good Samaritan. We heard how necessary it is as Christians to be extravagant in the help we give to those in need. For Catholics, serving our neighbour – especially those most in need – is not an optional extra. Say all the prayers we like, if we never turn our attention to society's most needy we will not get a place in heaven.

This week we hear how Mary has chosen the better part by sitting at the feet of the Master. Next week, we shall hear how the disciples ask Our Lord to teach them how to pray.

This series of events is not accidental in Luke's Gospel. First, placing ourselves at the service of those in need; second, turning our attention to Our Lord; third, immersing ourselves in prayer. With each step, Luke shows us the path we should all adopt. Each act of love for our neighbour is good in itself, but it mustn't stop there. If our work and our kind deeds are to echo in heaven or have any supernatural value, then they must be raised up to a supernatural level by having God as their starting point *and* their end point. Doesn't Our Lord Himself say elsewhere, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega: the beginning and the end'?

How is this 'raising up' to be accomplished? Through prayer.

Our Lord's teaching is clear: we cannot attain to salvation without good deeds. And although the good deeds are good in themselves, nevertheless we must still raise them up, through prayer, so that they participate in the goodness of God Himself.

Back to Martha and Mary. Martha's work in the kitchen was good in itself. She was doing exactly what a good host should do. But where Martha goes wrong is in being so preoccupied that she slips into the sin of resentment and complaint just because someone else

isn't sharing the chores. It is not Martha's work that Our Lord draws attention to, but Martha's being *anxious and troubled*.

If we do our chores at work, and at home, as if what really mattered was the idea that we are virtuously attending to our chores then we are likely to become vain, proud, and self-satisfied. *Then* we start to feel resentful that others haven't done their share of the work.

On the other hand, if, like Mary, we do not worry and fret about our chores but have God as their start and their end points – if we undertake our labours as if they were truly acts of service for our God – and if we offer these tasks up to God in prayer, then we are more likely to have chosen the better part, namely a service of neighbour that is *rooted in our love of God*. And when we do *this*, we will have attained to a treasure that is not to be taken from us because we shall have got our priorities right: love of God followed by, but not separated from, love of our neighbour. So, if we start every day with a Morning Offering – so that in beginning each day in prayer, our daily activities will have God as their starting point – then we can get on with whatever it is that we need to do.

As St Paul says, 'The mystery is Christ in you.'