



Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 17 July 2022

Pentecost 6

Christ urges us to seek first God's kingdom in our hearts and lives. Let us come before him in worship, praise and thanksgiving.

Reflection for this week's Gospel teaching

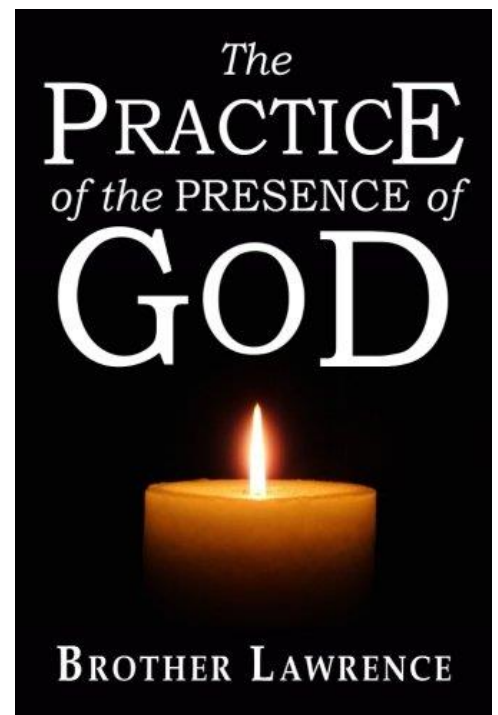
"There is need of only one thing." *Luke*
10:42

An Illustration to set the scene

The Practice of the Presence of God is one of the most important and influential spiritual writings to have come down to us from the mid-seventeenth century.

Its author, Brother Lawrence, was of lowly birth and, after serving as a soldier and a footman, in 1666 he became a lay brother in a community of Carmelites in Paris.

His spiritual message was very simple – whatever tasks we are called upon to fulfil in the course of our daily lives, it is possible to carry them out while consciously living within the loving presence of God.



And he lived what he taught, doing “**each thing in its season, with an even uninterrupted composure and tranquillity of spirit**”.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

The visit of Jesus to the sisters Mary and Martha forms a brief respite in what has been called a “*travelogue*” – ten chapters of Luke’s twenty-four-chapter Gospel take place while Jesus and his disciples are on the road.

This incident is short and apparently simple.

Jesus arrives for a meal and a rest in his busy schedule.

Martha runs herself ragged with the preparations while Mary sits quietly listening to their guest.

When Martha complains to Jesus, urging him to get Mary to help her, she receives a gentle rebuke rather than the supportive response she’d hoped for.

For centuries, the Church has used this incident with Jesus and the two sisters to illustrate the difference between **active and contemplative** ways of seeking God – with Mary, the contemplative, being commended for choosing the “**better part**”.

But this traditional interpretation inevitably leaves the reader with questions.

Isn’t Martha’s complaint understandable?

Do we find Jesus’ rebuke of her fair in the circumstances?

What does this interpretation have to say to those whose vocation is active, rather than a call to prayer and contemplation?

These two categories – action versus contemplation – are rather too neat and don't resolve the fundamental questions.

If, as tradition has taught, contemplation and action are both equally important to the Christian journey, why then does Jesus here claim that contemplation is **“the better part”**?

There is clearly more going on here than what one theologian Mary Hinkle Shore has called **“a spat about who will get dinner on the table”**.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

We probably find it quite easy to identify with Martha.

We tend to recoil if we feel we are treated unfairly, and feel hurt if our efforts go unappreciated or ignored.

But Jesus challenges us as well as Martha – and any sense of unfairness vanishes if we focus not on what the sisters are doing, but the way in which they are doing it.

On this occasion, Mary has brought her whole focus and attention onto the thing she has been called to do – namely to listen to Jesus.

By contrast, Martha is fretful and resentful as she carries out her tasks – she is not bringing the same focus and commitment to her meal preparation as Mary does to her listening.

Commenting on this passage, the spiritual writer and American Benedictine Thomas Keating has written this:

“The single eye of the Gospel is the eye of love, which is the desire to please God in all our actions, whatever these may be.”

Had Martha been fully present in her food preparation, there would have been no need for Jesus to rebuke her.

So if we shift the focus of our study of this Bible passage, the apparent contradictions dissolve.

We may feel, when looking at our own areas of activity, that this is easier said than done!

There are times when over busyness and mental and emotional distraction are familiar experiences for most of us.

But it is precisely at the pressure points of our greatest distraction that Jesus speaks to each one of us as he did to Martha.

We, too, may be **“worried and distracted by many things”**.

Brother Lawrence used to claim that, even when he was surrounded by all the daily clatter and bustle of the monastery kitchen, where he spent most of the working day, he possessed God **“in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament”**.

Now that is a challenge indeed!

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” *Luke 10:25*

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk