

Luke 10:38-42 Where is our focus?

Have you ever purchased something that comes with a set of instructions? One of the problems with instruction booklets, it that often the print is so tiny, you have great difficulty in reading it! I purchased a computer gadget a while back, which came with an instruction booklet - in tiny print! I tried holding it at arms length (no good). I tried reading it at the window in bright light (no good). It wasn't until I grabbed a magnifying glass, and held it so the words came into focus, that I could read the instructions clearly and benefit from them! Being able to focus is critical in gaining understanding.

Our Gospel reading this morning is about two much loved people in Jesus' life - Martha and Mary. It's a story that has much to say to us about our focus in life, and how that can please God.

Let's have a look at the reading:

From v.38: "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

What were Martha's many tasks? Think about it – Jesus and his group numbered 13. Martha & Mary were two more – at least. There could have been more in their household. So there were at least 14 people for lunch, or dinner – unannounced. There was food and drink to be sourced, not to mention plates and eating utensils, and a meal to be prepared for all those people. That would throw even the most organised hostess into a tizz! And Martha was narked, because all Mary was doing was sitting on the floor, listening to the Rabbi. There was so much to be done, and Mary wasn't lifting a finger....

One Christmas a few years back, we had Joel & his partner Crystal over for Christmas lunch. It was the first time we'd shared a Christmas meal in 6 years as they'd been living overseas. They bustled in, bags bulging with food, and took over the kitchen, telling us with much relish what yummy dishes they were going to prepare for lunch. Thinking they'd rather have the kitchen to themselves, I left them to it and collapsed on the couch, grateful for some space to recover from the morning's Christmas services. Well, that was a BIG mistake. I discovered before long that my absence from the preparations actually caused offence.... Don't you hate that - tension at Christmas?

Martha was offended by Mary's inactivity. **She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"**

Listen to Jesus' very interesting reply: **"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

Jesus response identified what was the most important thing to focus on that afternoon. It wasn't the meal - it was listening to Jesus share the words of Life.

Jesus wasn't criticising Martha for being a conscientious hostess, nor was he commending Mary for ignoring the dishes. He simply pointed out that amongst all the things that could be considered that afternoon, only one was really necessary – and that was to pay attention to what he had to share with them. Mary had recognised that, and Martha had not.

Martha was focused on her own goal. She was so busy being gracious and polite and a good hostess that she left herself no time to be with the Lord, or to even think about him.

Let's bring this closer to home. Where is our focus? Where is our attention? We may say that all we have—our time, our money, our life — is the Lord's, but does He have our attention? We may be so busy living our everyday lives, dealing with family, friends, home, church & community, that we don't leave ourselves much time to pay attention to Jesus. We can live good moral, upright, Christian lives, and serve our family, church & community with great zeal, but that is not the same as doing what Mary did – letting everything else go, putting time aside to focus completely on Jesus and to *listen* to him.

If you were here last week, you'll remember that we looked at the story of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, a man was set upon by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite both saw him, and passed by on the other side of the road. It was actually a despised Samaritan that stopped and helped the injured man.

Strictly speaking, according to their law, the priest and the Levite were doing the right thing. This injured man might possibly be dead, and touching him would render them ceremonially unclean. They would be unable to enter the synagogue to teach and preach. They couldn't take that risk. Their theological priorities kept them from acting in love. In today's story, Martha's social priorities kept her from focusing her attention on Jesus and His agenda for her life. Where are our priorities? What is the most important thing in our lives?

It's not difficult for us to lose sight of who we are and whose we are at times – particularly as we get older. It's not always young people who find life incredibly busy. I think retirees can be just as busy, if not more so. Not only do we need to stay in touch with family, there are often grandchildren to look after and friends and neighbours to care for; there's our volunteer work in the community and our work in the church; we have our homes to maintain, plus there are things we try and fit in for recreation – the list goes on. Then as we get older still, we add to that list the endless round of doctor's and specialist appointments and perhaps caring for an invalid spouse – all of which can make life even more full!

These things in our lives – all of which are good in themselves - can begin to choke God's life out of us if we are not alert to them. On our lovely bushy block in North Narooma, there are some young gum trees. Winding their way around the trunks and into the branches are some strangling vines. In the couple of years we've been there, we've watched them wrap themselves around the trunks and the branches so thoroughly that it is the vine that is pre-eminent, not the tree. We're going to have to deal with them, or eventually they will strangle the life out of the trees altogether.

If we're not careful, the fullness of our lives can do the same thing to our relationship with God, no matter who we are, or how long we've walked with the Lord.

Just a word about guilt though....I remember my early days as a Christian, and the encouragement we young people were given to have a quiet time every day - a time set aside for God where we could read his Word and pray. I embraced the discipline and found those times immensely valuable. They were foundational for me in establishing my relationship with God and helping me to learn about and apply the Scriptures.

However, along with the very strong encouragement from our youth leaders to have a regular quiet time also came a mental Big Stick! I'd beat myself up with it if I missed a few days, and the guilts at missing my quiet time had the power to rattle my confidence in Christ. Not that I ever doubted my salvation - but there were times I felt I'd let God down, and didn't feel close enough to him to be much use, because I'd missed a few 'Quiet Times'.

Of course that was not true. We are always precious to God. If we tune out, we miss out - as Martha did - no doubt about that. But God does not love us less or refuse to work through us if we miss a quiet time.

It took a while to grow into the realisation that what I had with God was in fact a relationship - not a legal agreement predicated on how faithful I was in my quiet time. A regular daily quiet time is invaluable - and I still highly recommend it, particularly to young believers. But we need to recognise that there are also other ways to sit at the feet of Jesus. We can curl up with a good Christian book; we can undertake some formal study of the Bible through an online course; we can become part of a Bible study group that meets regularly to learn about and discuss the Scriptures; we can listen to tapes, CD or podcasts as we drive or sit in front of the fire in winter; we can go for a walk in this beautiful area in which we live and simply commune with God; or my favourite - we can take off for several days and engage in a silent retreat. I take a retreat once or twice a year at least, and for me they are the most refreshing and enlightening encounters with Jesus. The key is to take time to listen, and to do it often.

If you find it hard to schedule a regular daily time to be alone with God – perhaps think about what time and place might work best for you.

This short little passage about Jesus' visit to Martha & Mary's house is a reminder to all of us to make Jesus's presence in our lives our primary focus. May we be alert to those things in our lives which threaten to draw us away from the Lord, and, like Mary, may we *choose* to set aside time specifically to pay attention to Him.

Let's pray.