

"Jesus said No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (v.62)

One of the great pleasures of driving through the countryside at this time of the year is to see those long straight lines of the young crops coming through, or perhaps the graceful sweeping curves as the ploughing and seeding follows the contours of the hills. That cannot be achieved if the operator of the tractor keeps looking back over his shoulder - he has to keep his eyes fixed on where he is going. It was the same in our Lord's day, even with a one-furrow plough drawn by an ox or an ass. No doubt the farmer of those times had the same desire to produce good straight furrows, as does his counterpart today.

You and I have made a decision to follow Christ. Perhaps the promise was first made on your behalf at your Baptism, or you might have made it for yourself if you were baptized as an adult. These are the words used in the old Prayer Book of 1662: "I demand therefore" said the priest, "dost thou, in the name of this child, renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow nor be led by them?" "I do". "Dost thou in the name of this child profess the Christian Faith?" "I do". "Dost thou in the name of this child promise obedience to God's holy will and commandments?" "I do". The promises made by an adult were just the same, but of course leaving out "in the name of this child".

The re-wording in the new Prayer Books - both A.A.P.B. and A.P.B.A. - is equally specific. I quote from the latter, A Prayer Book for Australia: "Children are baptized in response to God's all-embracing love. Parents and godparents who have responded to that love come now to bring this child for baptism. Before this congregation they must express their own trust and commitment to the promises of God, and their intention to bring up this child in the faith and practice of the Church. In due time this child should make his own response to God, and be prepared for confirmation." "Before God and this congregation, you must affirm that you turn to Christ and reject all that is evil: Do you turn to Christ?" "I turn to Christ". "Do you repent of your sins "I repent of my sins". "Do you reject selfish living, and all that is false and unjust?" "I reject them all". "Do you renounce Satan and all evil?" "I renounce all that is evil." And similar adjustments are made for adult baptism as in the older services.

The promises did not stop there. When we were older - and sometimes much older - we took on ourselves the promises made on our behalf as infants, or confirmed them if we had been baptized as an adult. "Do you here, in the presence of God, and of this

congregation, renew the solemn promise and vow that was made in your name at your baptism; ratifying and confirming the same in your own person, and acknowledging yourself to be bound to believe, and to do, all those things, which your godfathers and godmothers then undertook for you?" "I do." And without going through it all again, the modern Prayer Books have the confirmees renew their vows in a similar way.

That was when we formally and publicly put our hand to the Christian plough.

We are tempted at times to look back - perhaps to admire what a good job we've been doing all these years; perhaps a bit wistfully because the Christian life demands certain standards and restrictions without which life might appear to be less limiting, even we might think, freer. The furrow we plough at such times becomes rather wobbly, and if we take our hand off the plough altogether, our life becomes a real shambles. The parable breaks down a bit there. We are not able to replough that bit of our life, as a farmer might straighten out his field, but we can with God's help, get our lives on line again.

In today's extract from St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus briefly tells us what is expected of the person who would be his disciple, who seeks to belong to the Kingdom of Heaven. He makes four points, and they apply to our often slow and arduous apprenticeship.

James and John became very angry and aggressive at the insulting behaviour of the people of that Samaritan village. We can readily understand their rejection of Jesus - after all, the Jews had rejected the Samaritans over religious differences, and the bitter feud had been going on for years. Naturally they wanted nothing to do with this group, particularly if they had heard that Jesus was some kind of Jewish prophet. It was James and John who copped the rebuke. Our Lord's way was simply to ignore the unpleasantness and go on to another village. We don't have to defend God, and act unkindly or vindictively towards those who defame Him or ignore Him or act against His will. We might try to set such people right, but it must be in a kindly, gentle way. Aggression only causes aggression.

Then there were the three would-be disciples. To the first Jesus pointed out the need for total commitment. Perhaps the man saw only the glory of accompanying Jesus. Rather like seeing the Christian life entirely as going to church on convenient Sundays and contributing a few leftover dollars from the pay packet. Little real commitment, little real sacrifice. Secure. Comfortable. Jesus challenged him, as He does us, to a continuing, developing, expanding process of transformation.

Jesus seems to have been a bit tough on the second chap, who only wanted to see to his father's funeral before he followed. For a Jew the burial of one's parents was a supreme duty as well as a filial act of love. It is not clear whether the man meant that his father was already dead and awaiting immediate burial, or, and this is probably more likely, he meant: "I cannot leave home while my father is alive; wait until I am free from my duty to him." Jesus' call is immediate and He demands priority if we are to follow Him. When Jesus said "Let the dead bury their own dead," He was really saying, 'Let the spiritually

dead be distracted by worldly concerns; there is more important work for you to do.” He was not saying that we should ignore family obligations; rather He was saying that true discipleship means enduring to the end, and that every other consideration takes second place.

The third man who wanted to follow Jesus wished first to say goodbye to his family. Again, the urgency and demands of discipleship are made plain. Again, Jesus sounds a bit rough on the poor fellow. Becoming a disciple is not a sentimental action, not something to be acted upon by impulse, without being aware of the responsibilities involved. This man would have had divided loyalties, and would always be looking back wistfully. A true disciple keeps looking forward, to the Kingdom of Heaven, without looking back at the life he left behind.

So today we are reminded of what discipleship means. It is to have faith, and to follow wherever Jesus leads us. It is an invitation and a challenge to share in His lifestyle, in His values, and to face realistically the costs of our discipleship.

*“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”*

**Amen**

**SUNDAY BETWEEN 3 & 9 JULY, Year C      Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

The Gospel for today places before us a picture of the developing Church, in its early stage. At first there was only Jesus. Then he called others to follow him, and the Twelve began to be caught up in the mission. Chapter 9 of St. Luke's Gospel says: "When Jesus had called the Twelve together he gave them power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. .... So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere." (9:1,2)

Now we hear of 72 more disciples being sent out to carry on the work. It is interesting to note that their commission is set out in terms almost exactly the same as those for the Twelve.

That is basically the Commission of the Church still today: to preach and to show that the Kingdom of God has come near to us. The command "Go into all the world and preach the good news" was given to all, not merely to some spiritual aristocracy. God does not have a special set of obligations restricted to a specially-chosen and formal group of "first class" citizens of his Kingdom. The call is to each one of us, and each one is to respond - although the nature of our response will vary according to our abilities and personalities, and also according to the nature of our call from God. Not all are called to be clerics; not all are called to be preachers, or teachers, or evangelists, or martyrs, or to take some spectacular roll in the Church. But we are all called to exercise a Christian witness in the place where God has put us: at home, at work, at sport, at the various clubs and organisations to which we belong. And we should constantly be giving evidence by example and a word spoken at the right time, that we know the good news of the Kingdom of God. When people ask us about our Christian belief, we must be ready to give reasons for the faith we hold. For people are often lost and lonely and hungry for spiritual nourishment. Unfortunately the Church is the last place many people think to look. And that might just be your fault, or mine! We must live our belief and show forth in our lives what we profess here with our lips. The potential harvest is great: so many people need God in their lives - well, of course we all do, but you and I here this morning recognise that and are doing something about it. Many, many others need God but do not recognise their need.

The harvest is great, but the harvesters are few. That's nothing new in God's service. Even today with the high rate of unemployment, our theological colleges are not crowded. That is probably a good thing - it is a totally wrong attitude for a person to seek ordination just to get a job! A person who sets aside a vocation in which he or she has been even moderately successful, to take up the Sacred Ministry will be a far better servant of God and of his people than one who has sought ordination because no other

job was available. Yet we must continually pray to the Father who gives the potential harvest, to call and send sufficient harvesters. The current shortage of ordained clergy may even be a good thing, because it forces more lay men and women to use gifts which until now may have lain dormant.

For many Christian people the deceptively simple call to live out their faith in the world is not at all as easy as it sounds. How often do we hear people condemning the Church because of the awful things which mankind has done in the name of God? That is a cross we have to carry. Atrocities are not committed by Christians, or by the Church of God. Atrocities are committed often in the name of the Church by people calling themselves followers of Christ and even thinking that they do terrible things because God wills it. They are wrong. Anyone can label themselves "Christian", carry a banner, or wear a cross, use the name of the Church, to justify their own ambitions or power or wealth seeking. Around the world today many still do. But no one can **be** a Christian who commits murder, or rape, or pillage, or repression. A Christian worships the God who calls for love and peace, forgiveness and healing.

Jesus sent the 12, and then the 72, and by extension, us, against the powers of evil in this world as lambs in the midst of wolves. Do you ever get a feeling of despair as you read the daily newspapers and watch the news reports on television? At the back of our minds though, because we are Christians, we have a feeling don't we, that somehow, some day, it will all come right. That, for us is an exercise of faith, it is not mere wishful thinking. We know that in the end, God will triumph. But how depressing for a nonbeliever! What hope has he or she got?

The Lord sends us out into the world like lambs where there are dingoes. Therefore we go on in hope and faith and trust and confidence - because it is the Lord who sends us, and he cares for Us.. Jesus sent out the 12 and the 72 into the harvest inadequately funded. To all of us at times comes the despairing feeling that the Church is facing an impossible task with utterly inadequate financial resources. This is nothing new, although the instructions given to those early evangelists were: "Carry no purse" and "eat what is set before you". That implies surely that we are to make use of the assets and facilities and resources which we have available.

We are not in the same situation as the first disciples of course. Our ministry and our worship are set in a settled environment and in a situation where it is necessary to have funds available to maintain buildings and to provide for a paid ministry of ordained clergy, and all the associated costs involved in that provision. If we had more money we could do more things in what we see as God's work. Yet look what the Early Church achieved in its poverty!

So should we close this building and dispense with full-time paid clergy - or even part time? Today's situation is very different, and it is unlikely that such a drastic measure

would succeed.: An important part of the ministry of the laity - those not called to the professional ministry - is to provide from their income and resources the finance needed to maintain, develop, and extend the ministry of the Church which is the Body of Christ. And not merely for the local need, but in all the manifold works of charity and evangelism the Church undertakes, both in this country and in less fortunate places in the world. To the extent money is provided, the work can be done. To the extent money is not forthcoming, the work is hindered. Offhand, casual offerings made on the odd occasion a person attends worship never go amiss of course. But far more valuable to the giver is the planned proportional contribution seen by the giver as a sharing in the ministry given to the Church by its Lord.

The first disciples were sent out penniless to teach them daily dependence upon God. In our concern about our Church's limited financial resources, we too must learn the lesson of dependence upon God's provision.

As we go about our daily round, we should be aware that we are Christ's disciples. People know that we go to church, and they watch us and they hear us. Are we any different from those who do not profess to be Christians? We ought to keep in mind that Christ works through us as well as in us. So our lives should radiate peace, confidence and joy. As we talk with our friends, neighbours and workmates, and the opportunity arises to talk about our faith, we should do so openly and freely, without embarrassment. We are not to try and talk them into something which we know is good for them - we are reaching out in love and friendship, for that is the way Jesus acted. Better to ask: "Are you hurting; what can I do to help?" rather than: "You should come to church" or even: "Are you saved?"

Our witness, our discipleship, should be because we know God and love him and worship him and desire to serve him. We have accepted Jesus as Lord and we know the joy of that relationship. We might well be as lambs among wolves; we might be few and uncertain harvesters; we might have limited financial resources. But we are the Body of Christ. The Kingdom of God has come near us: God is with us, now and for ever.

**AMEN**

## **SUNDAY BETWEEN 10 & 16 JULY, Year C**

**Responsibility: Canon Ian Barlow**

Instead of directly answering the lawyer who asked Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", Jesus returned a question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And because the questioner was a lawyer and perhaps sensitive to any implication that he might not know the Law, he replied with quotations from the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus well known to all Jews: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind", and "Love your neighbour as yourself." "You have answered correctly," said Jesus.

Duty to God. Duty to others. The summing up of the Ten Commandments, and which we use so frequently in the preparation part of the service of Holy Communion.

But how can we love God with all our very being, when so much of what we know of Him is in abstract terms? God the Son - Jesus - we can know because here is God in human terms. Even so, we tend to hear too often that we must love Him because of what He did for us, which is a bit like a parent saying to a child: "You must love me because I am your father, or mother." We hear and read about Jesus teaching good and wise principles; healing people; dying on the Cross; even rising from death. Can we love Him, if that is all we have to go on?

How can we love God the Father - the Creator - when we think of the complexity of this Being who made our universe in all its unimaginable vastness, as well as its infinitely minute structures?

How can we love God the Holy Spirit - the Spirit who we tend to think of as a benign influence rather than a personal Being?

St .John in his First Epistle to the Church at large provides the solution in his great essay on love: "Dear friends, let us one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has born of God and knows God." (4:7) Again: "No one has ever seen but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is complete in us." (v.12) Again: "If anyone says 'I love been God; made yet hates his brother, he is a liar .For anyone who does his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he (v.20) love God', not love has not seen.

That's all very well, and the First Epistle of John is well worth another look if you haven't read it lately. But how can we love those distinctly unloveable people down the road or next door or who we are forced by circumstances to rub shoulders with? Try to love them without asking God to help you, and see how you get on! You will find that both your and their defects will get in the way. And if you are like most of us, you will find yourself concentrating more on their defects and differences than on your own. "They would be quite nice people if only .... " Or praying God to make them nice, like us. So we

are tempted to set them right. And good advice causes resentment, and thence it is a short step to insult and to estrangement-, and the last state becomes worse than the first. There is another alternative, if you are too kind and too modest to try to set them right, and that is to switch off altogether, to be completely indifferent to the well-being and welfare of such people. To lose concern entirely.

The difficulty is to love people for what they really are: fellow members of the human family for whom Christ became Man, and suffered, and died. And the only way to help them to be better than they are is to love them unreservedly, with no strings attached, as Christ did.

In case you're getting anxious, "love" in this context means selfless concern and consideration, without thought of reward or return. And we cannot achieve this by an act of will, except perhaps for short periods. Our minds are too darkened by sin. or mental aberration, or whatever you like to call it - and yet nothing else will either tidy up this world or get us into the next. We must acknowledge the failure of our will and ask God for help.

So it seems that the Commandment of Love involves us in a contradiction. In order to achieve the love of God, we must love our fellow men and women; but we can't love them genuinely unless we begin by loving God!

If we try to solve the paradox by reasoning and logic, we will find it rather like trying to solve the problem of the chicken and the egg - which came first? What does it matter though, as long as we have the chickens and the eggs? We do not live by reasoning and intelligence alone; we still see as through a glass, darkly. We cannot by taking thought add one cubit to our stature, or keep our hearts beating. Something else does that for us: something that is not of our own minds holds the universe together and keeps the earth going round the sun and organises our digestive systems and so on. And if it can do that, we may reasonably expect that that Something, which is really a Someone - will enable us to love God and our fellow human beings simultaneously.

The answer to the problem has been provided: "If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (1 John 4:12) "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:31) No mention of how you feel towards another person: just give what you'd like to get. This of course is the underlying reason for the Church's concern in such causes as Austcare, Amnesty International, the Bush Church Aid Society, the Australian Board of Missions, the Church Missionary Society, the Missions to Seafarers, Anglicare, and many many more. "Love the Lord your God ..... Love your neighbour as yourself ..... Do this and you will live."

Have you ever helped somebody you didn't want to help, because they have taken up your time before, and they don't deserve your help anyway; but you have sighed and helped again just because - well - perhaps you are soft-hearted.? And afterwards you have felt deep down a little

glow of satisfaction? An unreasonable feeling perhaps, because from a practical point of view you have wasted valuable time and energy – and even money – for nothing in return. You tell yourself that the feeling is only vanity or sentimentality. But that little glow, that warm feeling, ought to be treasured. The wet blanket of self and worldliness will soon extinguish it if we do not.

While it lasts, see it for what it is; see it and recognize the love of God for you. For one moment, self was put aside, with its desires and its rights, for the need of another: without thought of reward or recompense.

Now what if that glow never went out, but grew and spread and filled your whole consciousness? What new, exciting, miraculous life might you experience if you ever managed to dispense with the demands and desires of self entirely? That is what Christ urged us to try for – the full blaze of God’s love. Inexpressible delight of soul and mind and body; joy beyond all joy. And when we do leave self behind, and attain this state of being, this is Heaven, be it in this world or the next. This is our goal, our vocation.

Over and over again, people ask ‘What shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ The answer always is the same: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with your whole being .... And your neighbour as yourself.’

**Amen**

Prior to the revision of the Prayer book of 1662 in 1928, Saint Mary Magdalene's Day did not rate as a major Festival of the Church. Obviously the reformers saw great importance in having her life and example and placed more emphatically before the Church. And so we have it today.

No doubt there were other women who were healed of their troubles as was Mary of Magdala. Mary's claim to a place of honour in the Church's Calendar lies partly in her extreme love for, and faith in our Lord, and more importantly in the fact that she was the first witness to Christ's resurrection.

The term "magdalene" is a form of identification - surnames as we know them were not in use in those times. There are a number of Marys mentioned in the Gospels: our Lord's mother of course; Mary of Bethany sister of Martha and Lazarus Mary the mother of the apostle James the younger; and Mary the mother of Mark, in whose house Jesus and his friends often met. Incidentally each one of these Marys is noted for her love and faithfulness.

But today we are concentrating on Mary of Magdala. **Magdala** was a town in Galilee, not far from the Sea of Galilee, on the road from Nazareth to Capernaum, a road frequently taken by Jesus. Possibly she was a woman of some position and influence in the town, for she gave materially as well as of herself to help Jesus' ministry. St. Luke tells us that Jesus had driven seven devils out of her. What this means in today's terms we cannot really tell - we are too sophisticated to believe that evil spirits can literally take possession of a person, but perhaps we ought not be too sure. Missionaries in primitive countries come across phenomena that can only be explained in this way. Whatever it was that afflicted her, Jesus healed her, and forever afterwards she was His faithful and devoted follower.

Mary Magdalene was the first to see Christ's empty tomb. She was the first to report to the disciples the miracle of the Resurrection, the greatest event the world has ever known. St. John's description of the sepulchre is a vivid and moving piece of writing, as we heard in the Gospel Reading for today. Alone, or according to St. Mark, with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, came to the tomb intending to perform a last loving service to the body of their Lord, a service not possible when it had been lowered from the cross, because of the commencement of the Sabbath at 6pm on the Friday evening. To touch a dead body at that time would have meant exclusion from the Sabbath services through ceremonial uncleanness.

However, as early as possible on the first day of the week, "early while it was yet dark", Mary and possibly other women went to the tomb. To their horror they saw the entrance to the cave gaping open, with the great stone which had blocked the entrance rolled back along its groove. The first thought naturally was that the Jewish authorities had removed the body, perhaps to prevent any fake resurrection stories. Rushing back to Peter and John Mary gasped out the seemingly bad news: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have ., put him!". Peter and John dashed off to see for themselves. They looked inside, saw that

the tomb was indeed empty, but also saw the burial cloths lying neatly, and they realised the full truth of what had happened. Jesus had fulfilled his prediction: "The Son of Man will be ... mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life." (Matt.20:19)

When Mary, who had followed on slowly, arrived, Peter and John apparently had left. Looking into the cave for herself, Mary saw two heavenly beings sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. There followed that gentle and sympathetic question: "Woman, why are you crying?" Mary answered: "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." Turning away, she saw Jesus standing there, but blinded by her tears no doubt, she did not recognise him. She took him to be the gardener. Not until he spoke her name did she recognise who it was. Though she had not found Christ, he had found her, and called her by name. Then she recognised him: "Master", she said. Jesus said to her: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. But instead go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to my Father and your Father, my God and your God." Mary of Magdala hastened to tell the others that she had seen the Risen Lord and that he had said these things to her.

I have gone over this story again at some length partly because at Easter, when this incident fits in, there so many aspects of the Resurrection story that some, like this, get glossed over

In Christ's Resurrection Mary Magdalene had witnessed not a mere resuscitation, but a changing to another form, a form not subject to the ordinary laws of the flesh, , but ready now for a new mode of existence and a new set of relationships; a form not temporal but eternal. Yet he was still alive, active, able to reach out and to speak

From medieval times Mary Magdalene has been one of the most maligned women in the New Testament, largely because scholars from an earlier period identified her with the unnamed sinful woman who washed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair at the dinner given by Simon the Pharisee. Immediately following this incident in St. Luke's Gospel mention is made of several women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases, and who were helping to support Jesus and the Twelve out of their own means. And Mary, called Magdalene, from whom Jesus had driven seven demons, was one of these. (Lk.8:2,3) But there is no identification of the one with the other. Through this misinterpretation, the term "a magdalene" has come to mean a reformed woman of sin, or even at times a woman of sin unreformed.

But as we read the Scriptures we see a woman who displayed the highest qualities of fortitude in moments of anxiety; courage under trying circumstances; love that could not fail; and humility and devotion to the Saviour whom she had seen crucified. Her faith is a monument to the healing power of Jesus. Her actions in serving him in life and ministering to him when the mob had turned against him and had him killed is in the best tradition of devoted womanhood.

The last we read of Mary is when she hastened to the disciples with the news "I have seen the Lord!" What a wonderful commission: "Go and tell my brothers." And this commission is

recorded by each of the writers of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is interesting to compare the observations of the independent authors.

This is still the and commission of the Church today – to go out and witness to the fact of Christ's conquest of death. Mary Magdalene did not hesitate to carry out her instructions for she was convinced of the truth of what she had seen and heard. It had been neither vision nor hallucination. It had really been the Risen Christ Who had shown Himself to her and spoken to her.

Is the Church so convinced today? That Christ has risen from the dead, and holds out to us the hope of everlasting life? Remember the Great Commission recorded at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always." **Amen**

**Barlow**

"The Lord answered her: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:41,42)

In five verses St. Luke portrays a situation and a dilemma, and the answer to it - a situation and a dilemma which the Christian faces quite frequently. The choice between the duties and the cares of everyday life, and the need to sit at the feet of Jesus. -

Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus were close friends of Jesus. Their home was a place where he could call in at any time, sure of a welcome. A place where he could relax. Indeed it would seem that their home in Bethany, quite near Jerusalem, was where Jesus stayed each night of the last week of his earthly life, until his arrest on Maundy Thursday night. We can imagine what a comfort it must have been to Jesus to have such a place to go to, with such understanding people to care for him, in his time of crisis.

The incident recorded for today's Gospel suggests that this was the first visit of Jesus to the house at Bethany. If so, we can understand Martha's anxiety that everything should be nice for their guest. It's not difficult to see Martha getting flustered and hot and bothered, and annoyed with her sister sitting quietly and peacefully with Jesus. I am sure that Jesus was aware of the tension building up, and that he deliberately waited for the explosion which enabled him to, point out that although hospitality required certain chores to be done, Mary had in fact chosen the better thing. It was probably not selfishness that let Mary leave Martha with the housework - Martha seems to be the practical and competent type, quite happy in managing and coping with the household chores, and generally tolerant of her young sister's quiet, pensive nature. Mary would have known that Martha could cope, but perhaps this time Martha too would have liked to sit and listen to Jesus - except that her practical nature wouldn't let her - the outburst was the result of her inner conflict.

The difference in the natures of these two sisters shows up again when their brother died. They sent for Jesus, but by the time he got there, Lazarus had been buried. Practical, energetic Martha went out to meet Jesus; Mary stayed at home. It was to Martha that Jesus said those familiar and highly significant words 'often used in the Funeral Service: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25,26)

The impracticality of Mary is suggested in a later incident when, to express her adoration of Jesus, she anointed his feet with precious perfume and wiped them with her hair. Judas Iscariot complained that the ointment could have been sold for 300 denarii<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A denarius is the equivalent of one day's pay for a worker

and the proceeds given to the poor. That would be the practical thing to do. The same argument arises today, when we talk of creating beautiful places of worship, or beautifying those we have.

The age in which we live is great on activity and vigorous doing. Christians, and for that matter people in all walks of life are constantly called to talks and discussion groups, assemblies and meetings. We are made to feel guilty if we do not attend study groups and seminars. We are accused, almost, of being less than Christian if we prefer to read our Bibles alone and quietly for ourselves rather than belong to some Bible Study group, or if we prefer to pray alone, rather than become involved in a Prayer Circle. What seems to be lacking is the desire to be quiet, and to listen. "Be still, and know that I am God" wrote the Psalmist in the name of God. (Psalm 46:10)

Too much activity, too much fussing, too much "clap your hands and shout Alleluia" can distract our minds from God, and even keep them on a plane of superficial religiosity. Too many committee meetings, assemblies and seminars can even be a cloak for our refusal to face up to the realities of our own responsibilities, to what might need attention in our own lives. This might even be the product of frustration and despair.

It is of course right and proper that Christian men and women should be active in the world. Christians must be sensitive to the needs of others, and be prepared to give of themselves in compassion to those in distress and need. Christians must be involved in the

Secular world, and its life and activities. But not at the cost of faithful worship. And always striving to present the Christian attitude and standard without fear and with dilution. If Christians are to have anything worthwhile to contribute to this life, they must be ready to listen to God and to wait upon Him.

Many people are quite eager to take their part in social welfare work: too many do not see the necessity of joining in worship in church. To take part in work for the well-being of those in need is always good, but we must always have something that is real, lasting, eternal to contribute. The supplying of comfort - food, clothing, shelter, and the like is important, but it is a bit like Martha's housekeeping - temporary and transitory. The things of God are eternal, and if we are to communicate such things as our knowledge of the love of God, of his salvation, of his ever-present support, then we must first, like Mary, sit at the feet of Jesus. This means prayer, Bible reading, worship, Holy Communion . It means finding - making - time to wait upon God. If we can give people a sense of the reality of God, then we shall have achieved something worthwhile.

We need to learn the priorities of life. It is fatally easy to be so preoccupied and absorbed in our work, so involved in our sport, that we never have the time to give to our families the love and the attention they need and deserve. It is fatally easy not to have the time for worship.

It was quite right that Martha should have been busy with hospitality for her guest. But time spent with Jesus was far more important. And Mary was right in sitting at his feet to **listen** and learn. We must learn of Jesus, and to do so, find time to be still and **listen to Him**. For it was **He** Who said that Mary had chosen the better thing. **AMEN**.

*One of Jesus' disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray as John (the Baptist) taught his disciples.'*  
*Luke 11:1*

This is an interesting request, because all of Jesus' disciples were practicing Jews, religious men, and prayer was an integral part of the life of a practicing Jew. It was an important aspect of worship. At least two of the disciples had been followers of John the Baptist, - Andrew and John – and he would have taught them to pray, as this very text indicates. From the earliest records in the Old Testament we know that men and women had sought God's support and guidance, for themselves as well as for others. There are very many instances of people praying in the Old Testament, and the Psalms are full of prayer: meditation, intercession and praise.

We pray too – formally, here at public worship, and probably less formal in private. We acknowledge that God – Who sees all and knows all – knows what is right and best for His people. We acknowledge His wisdom, and we stumble at the idea of trying to persuade Him to do something which we feel to be proper, but which He might have to be talked into. After all we are His people; He is not our servant. *We know that.*

Yet, here in today's Gospel, Jesus quite clearly sates, 'Ask and it shall be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.' We know, though, from experience, that our prayers are NOT always answered in the way we might want them to be. So there must be some qualification, some condition not clearly spelt out in this passage.

Look at it this way: Jesus taught His disciples to pray using the term "Father" – or more accurately, 'Daddy,' for the Aramaic word is 'Abba,' the familiar address of a child to his or her human father. And Jesus pointed out that no father among them would give his child a snake in response to a request for a fish; or a scorpion in place of an egg. Our Heavenly Father will not act less worthily.

What is NOT spelt out – but which we may safely assume – is that our Heavenly Father would not respond unwisely or unjustly in answer to prayer. A wise parent denies a child things asked for when the granting of such a desire would be harmful. No matter how great our faith is God's willingness to accede to our prayers, the answer to prayer which is **not** in accordance with His will must always be 'NO' ... or at least, 'wait.'

Nevertheless the plain message of the parable of the persistent friend who sought bread at midnight because of unexpected visitors, is that we are to persevere in prayer. In the story, the householder was – naturally enough – peeved and reluctant to crawl out of bed and disturb his household, but because of the persistent knocking, he got up and gave bread for the sake of meeting a neighbour's need.. (I doubt very much that God would give in to us just so that we would stop pestering Him!!!!!! That does not fit in with other assurances about the answering of prayer It is not wise policy for a parent to give in to their pestering children merely for the sake of peace .... Even though, at times, most of us do!

Why then is perseverance in prayer so important? There is certainly no value in the mere mechanical repetition of prayers. Jesus taught us that when He spoke of the folly of heathen who, He said, 'think that they will be heard for their many words.' (Matt 6:7) So there must be a deeper reason for persistence.

You know the old saying, 'Easy come; easy go!' A person who obtains money or possessions without working for them, often does not value what he gets. Certainly he values them much less than the person who has worked hard and saved hard for many years, and values the results of his labour. Up to a point, this is true of things that come to us from God. Getting things easily by prayer would certainly tend to spoil us as Christians, and as humans. Christianity would become something of a 'cargo cult,' if everything we asked for was handed out freely. So our Heavenly Father puts upon us a discipline of prayer.

The very fact that we do not give up praying about something, but keep going through weeks, months or years of apparently unrewarded waiting, is proof of our faith in prayer, in God's promises with regard to prayer. It is witness to our belief that God will come to our aid in His own time, and in His own way. Jesus could heal only those who had faith in Him, or whose friends had the necessary faith. It may well be that God's power to help those who seek His help depends on their faith in Him, and one of the things that demonstrate our faith is our persistence in prayer.

The act of prayer, too, is good for us. It is beneficial to our spiritual life to seek contact with God and to turn our thoughts frequently to Him, just as – only more so – we benefit from being in the company of fine fellow human beings. Apart altogether from the actual objectives of our petitions, we are the better for praying regularly, and praying often.

You probably noticed that St. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is much shorter than that which we use so often, which is nearer to St. Matthew's version. Luke's version has only five petitions (Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come; Give us each day our daily bread; forgive us our sins; do not bring us to the time of trial.) Matthew on the other hand, adds 'Your will be done; and deliver us from the evil one.' Some ancient manuscripts add the familiar (to us) 'for the kingdom the power and the glory are Yours, now and for ever, Amen.' In fact only the King James Version of the Bible adds this; more modern translations have a footnote explaining that this is a (then) later addition. Those are just a couple of observations in passing, in case you were wondering where our longer Lord's Prayer comes from, when the one in today's Gospel reading is so much shorter.

What is so much more important, is that we should realize that prayer, as we find it illustrated in Holy Scripture, is not primarily a mystic experience but the expression of desire to work with God in the carrying out of His purposes in the salvation of mankind. Certainly we are to pray for ourselves, and those whose needs we see- whenever we ask God for anything that is good and right, we please Him by so doing. But the supreme petition of the Christian is for the guidance, help, spiritual strength and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

*'If you then know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.'*

**Amen**