

**Trinity 9: 29 July 2018**

**Mary, Martha and Lazarus: 2 Kings 4.42-44;  
Ephesians 3.14-21; John 6.1-21**

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first time I visited the Holy Land, on a pilgrimage led by the Dean of St Mellitus College, Graham Tomlin, who is now Bishop of Kensington, we went to Bethany and to the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Today is a lesser feast day, dedicated to Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Companions of Jesus.

We entered their house from the top and gradually we went down several storeys, and stood in the rooms where Jesus himself spent time with these friends. When Jesus visited Jerusalem, he stayed with them in Bethany, which was only two miles from the city. And presumably his disciples stayed there with him.

Hospitality is important in the Jewish faith and clearly this family espoused that value, welcoming Jesus and his twelve disciples into their home on numerous occasions. I don't know about you, but I would certainly be a bit taken aback if thirteen people suddenly arrived on my doorstep expecting to be fed and to stay the night. But that did not appear to be a problem for this family. And our readings remind us that God is generous in feeding us. In the reading from Kings, Elisha's servant cannot believe that twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain will be enough to feed a hundred people. In the same way, the disciples in our reading from John's gospel cannot believe that the five loaves and two fish from one boy will be enough to feed five thousand people. But both Elisha, the man of God, and Jesus, God's son, know that God is generous and will provide more than enough for all to eat. As has been pointed out by others, Jesus and his

Father both love a party! Hospitality must be one of the many virtues to be given as a gift from the Jewish to the Christian faith.

We also see generosity revealed in another way when Jesus comes to Bethany six days before the Passover and Martha provides Jesus with a celebratory meal, and Mary anoints Jesus's feet with costly ointment of pure nard worth three hundred denarii. Since a denarii was the amount a labourer would be paid for a day's work, this ointment is worth the equivalent of a year's wages. And it shows the love that Mary has for Jesus, that she is willing to give him a gift that must have consumed her life's savings, a gift which he recognises as a preparation for his death to come so soon.

What else do we learn about Jesus and about God from these three companions of Jesus? We certainly learn about faith and trust. When Lazarus is sick and his sisters

send for Jesus, he tests their faith by not responding immediately to their call. Instead he stays away two days longer, knowing that Lazarus will be dead by the time he arrives. And when Jesus finally does arrive, too late to save Lazarus from dying, Martha immediately demonstrates the strength of her faith in Jesus by saying to him that if he had been there Lazarus would not have died. Even though he is already dead, she says that she knows that whatever Jesus asks of God, God will give him. Her faith is unshakeable even in the face of her brother's death. And when Jesus tests her further by reminding her that her brother will rise again, Martha responds by saying that she knows that he will rise again at the resurrection at the last day. But Jesus wants her to understand more than this. He wants her to understand who he is and that he is himself the resurrection and the life. And she affirms her belief:

‘Yes Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.’ That is a certainty given to few of the disciples. Peter similarly acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, but then denies Christ three times and deserts him at the cross. It is the women, perhaps Martha among them, who stand fast, whose faith is true and who are with Jesus and his mother at Calvary. It is their faith and devotion that is a lesson for us all.

Similarly, when Jesus encounters Mary, she also affirms her faith that if Jesus had been there her brother would not have died. Jesus then calls on his Father to raise Lazarus from the dead, just days before he himself will die and be raised by the Father from the dead. In Jesus’s case his resurrection will be eternal, destroying the power of death for ever and giving us the gift of eternal life, and

confirming the words he has spoken to Martha: ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’

When we visited the Holy Land on that first occasion, we were reminded that Jesus could have chosen in those last days when he was visiting his friends in Bethany, not to turn towards Jerusalem, not to face death on the cross, but to escape his fate. It would have been easy for him to slip silently away from the Garden of Gethsemane, over the hill to Bethany, only a mile or two away, to join his friends, to opt for safety rather than salvation. And in these scenes in John’s and Luke’s gospels, we see Jesus spending time with those he loved (and John emphasises how much he loved his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus) and preparing himself for what is to come. The friendship and hospitality of these three, two sisters and a brother, show Christ in both his humanity, enjoying the simple fellowship of good company, before we see his

divinity revealed to us in his sacrifice on the cross. Christ:  
human and divine, shares our life here on earth with  
friends and parties, good times and bad; leading us to the  
divine life with his Father, sharing with us the life eternal.  
Amen.