

## Luke: How do we set our hand to the plough?

Our final reading in June, the week before the ordination of Paul, our new curate left us with a challenge:

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

The readings for July (most of Luke 10 and 11) seem to give us two contrasting messages of what we need to do if we do put our hand to God's plough. The first two readings are all about activity, the second two about listening and prayer. The Good Samaritan with its final demand: *Go and do likewise* is immediately followed by Jesus' seeming commendation of Mary, the sister who did nothing to help in the house: *Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.*

So what does Jesus want us to do? Should our mission and ministry be through active lives or contemplative lives? What does Luke think, for he clearly intended to put these two stories beside each other?

We ended June with putting our hand to the plough (9:62), and we begin July with the Sending out of the Seventy (10:1-20). The harvest theme is continued, for as he sends them out on mission they are told that *the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest* (v.2). Jesus and Luke's message is clear. The Twelve (perhaps symbolising the twelve tribes of Israel) have already been sent out (9:1-10). Now seventy (in Jewish thought a number representing wholeness) are sent to *every town and place where he himself intended to go* (v.1). Jesus tells us that even seventy is not enough. And so we too are challenged to join in as labourers in God's harvest, spreading the Good News wherever Jesus intends to go – everywhere, as *a light for those who sit in darkness*, (1:79) and *a light for revelation to the gentiles* (2:32).

The universal nature of our mission is continued in our next reading, the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37). To inherit eternal life the Law (Old Testament and New) demands that we not only love God, but also *love our neighbour as ourselves* (v.27). The parable tells us that being a loving neighbour means we need to love those beyond our own kinship and friendship groups, to those we would not choose to have as our neighbours, and it is a practical loving after the manner of the Samaritan, *Go and do likewise* (v.37).

But now we move onto the seeming paradox (10: 38 – 42). The active Martha is not praised or even given practical help. It is Mary, just sitting and listening who is affirmed. We are British, all brought up with a protestant work ethic. Our sympathies, unlike Jesus' go out to the hardworking Martha. But perhaps there is a clue in the text that Jesus is less unsympathetic than at first appears. Mary has chosen who she will listen to. Martha, so busy with her middle-eastern hospitality has no time to listen. She is *distracted*. Jesus has already warned us of distraction: *no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back ...* . Jesus does not speak to Martha in anger, but rather in gentle sympathy. There is great compassion in his repetition of her name, *Martha, Martha*. In showing her that she is distracted, he is inviting her to come and listen, to join Mary at his feet. If we do not listen, how can we know what it is that is to be our mission and ministry?

Our final reading is also about understanding and aligning ourselves to God's ways in the world (11:1-13). It is about prayer. The disciples ask to be shown how to pray. Jesus responds by teaching the pattern prayer, our Lord's Prayer. He continues with further teaching on prayer. We are to be persistent, as the man in the parable, for he is given *whatever he needs* (v.8).

If we are to put our hand to God's plough, as labourers for his harvest we need to listen as well as do.

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