✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our common English usage, there are expressions we use which have their origin in our religious traditions – e.g. last Sunday’s Gospel parable has resulted in the expression ‘being a Good Samaritan.’ Indeed, there is an organisation called ‘The Samaritans’ whose aim is to provide support to people in emotional crisis, etc. - This morning’s Gospel incident, where Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary, has resulted in another expression, maybe in less common usage – that of being a ‘Martha’ or a ‘Mary.’ - (Interestingly, if you watched the Handmaid’s Tale TV series, there was a whole category of women called ‘Marthas’ who carried out the domestic chores in homes.) – Generally, the Martha/Mary reference relates to whether you are an ‘active’ person who likes to just ‘get on with things’ – this is in opposition to the type of person who tends to think or daydream and reflect! Indeed, some people will identify themselves as a ‘Martha’ or a ‘Mary.’

Within the Christian Spiritual tradition, particularly the religious life of monks and nuns, these two women have been used to define two different types of spirituality: Mary is the contemplative; Martha represents the ‘active’ life. – And sometimes the contemplative life was seen as the more perfect. - The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, in a small book on contemplative prayer actually challenges this understanding because it appears to separate one type from the other. He says, and I paraphrase, that Martha and Mary are sisters. In other words, they need each other. It is not that one is better than the other, for in reality there is a balance between the contemplative aspects of the Christian life and the active ‘doing’ aspects of life.

With that, let us have a look at our Gospel today - not forgetting that it is paired with an equally interesting Old Testament Lesson.

Jesus is visiting Martha and Mary at Bethany. Martha, as a good middle-eastern woman, extends the welcome of hospitality which is still a feature of the middle-east. The stranger or the important visitor should be treated hospitably and with honour, and Martha exhibits this. Our Old Testament reading of the Hospitality of Abraham shows us this same practice. One, or three (-the text fluctuates as to the number) visitors appear. Indeed our reading begins – *The Lord appeared to Abraham…*. What would be normal hospitality is extended to these mysterious visitors – and if you look, it is not just a tea and bikkie hospitality taking place!

There is a contrast though which takes place. Abraham and Sarah extend quite a considerable effort to be hospitable. Martha, on the other hand, even though fulfilling the customary role of hostess, seems to get herself into a tizz, (possibly concentrating too much on the job being done and even ignoring the reason – the guest?) and Jesus calls her attention to this! She is upset that her sister Mary isn’t helping in the kitchen, but Jesus says: *Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things.*  So – whereas Abraham & Sarah are presented positively, Martha seems to be receiving a rebuke. - Indeed the next bit of Jesus’ comment to her is the origin of the false divide or dichotomy between Martha, and her type of personality, and Mary: *There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.* – This potentially gives the impression that Mary’s way is totally better!

In reality, what is happening here, as far as Luke the Gospel writer is concerned, isn’t about saying let’s all go off and become contemplatives. Rather, there is a priority attached to the particular moment! – At **THIS** moment Martha, you should be taking up the opportunity, like Mary, to listen to Jesus, who is present as your honoured guest. The priority is to listen to God, instead of rushing around deciding what God/Jesus needs. - You are in the presence of heavenly food; take a pause to be refreshed by that before rushing around with the demands of earthly food!

A helpful insight to do with today’s Gospel comes when we look at it in terms of what immediately precedes it – We need to remember that the Gospel writers are telling us a narrative or story ‘with purpose.’ They are working with the information they know and moulding it for their original audience. So – what is immediately before today’s Gospel story? – It is the encounter between Jesus and the Scribe which results in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And what was their original discussion about? – It was about the Law of God, in which Jesus gives the summary – Love God, Love Neighbour. The Scribe then wants to know what the answer is to *‘Who is my neighbour?*’ (As we saw last Sunday, this was something of a trick question, but Jesus turns it around so that the Scribe – and we – have to ask, ‘to whom do I need to be neighbour?’) – But I digress!

Last Sunday’s part of St. Luke’s narrative is answering the ‘Love your neighbour’ aspect of God’s Law; today’s incident between Jesus, Martha & Mary, is about the ‘Love the Lord your God’ aspect of God’s commandments. – The two passages are related and are filling out something for the disciple, the follower of Jesus, whether 2,000 yrs. ago or now. - Love toward/attentiveness toward God, and Love toward neighbour, the person in need, no matter who, go hand in hand. Attending to who and what God is results in discovering how God wishes us to be toward those around us, especially the person who needs us to show compassion toward them in their need!

So, today, we hear two stories about welcoming the Holy One, who comes as friend or stranger into our midst. We are being invited to look more deeply into these stories – Abraham & Sarah in their ‘listening’ are promised flesh and blood descendants, but as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, Abraham’s true descendants are ultimately not physical but spiritual – the ones who trust in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of the Covenant – the people who enter into the journey of faith.

And with Martha and Mary, we are encouraged to have open hearts as disciples, to ‘listen’ to what the Lord has to say – week by week as we hear our scriptures - seeking to welcome the Lord into our lives.

So, let us be Mary, before we become Martha, because Martha and Mary are sisters, going in tandem in the experience of our Christian journey and discipleship.

Eternal God,

you draw near to us in Christ

and make yourself our guest.

Amid the cares of our daily lives,

make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence,

that we may treasure your word above all else.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen

.  Both stories have a common element of welcoming the Holy   
One who comes as friend, or stranger.

We are being invited   
to look more deeply into these quaint sounding domestic stories.    
Abraham and Sarah will have the promised flesh and blood descendants --   
but their true descendants will be children in the spirit who trust in   
the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of the covenant, who will be with   
the people in their faith journey. So too with Mary and Martha, we are   
their descendants, we who also try to have open hearts and listening   
ears to the “guests” we welcome into our lives.

we who hear week after week   
these selections from Luke’s gospel, are like Mary sitting beside the   
“Lord at his feet,” listening to his teaching so as to learn how to   
“welcome” the Lord into our lives.

Dear Preachers:  
Today’s gospel is in a section of Luke known as the “Journey Narrative”   
(9:51-19:28). We have had passages from this section since the   
thirteenth Sunday, when Luke first told us that Jesus, “resolutely   
determined to journey to Jerusalem” (9:51).  Some of the stories in this   
section have Jesus literally on the road, while in others we find him   
pausing in his travels; but the journey to Jerusalem is always the   
subtext to the story. In today’s passage he is off the road and the   
guest of two sisters Martha and Mary.  
  
Some caution flags go up for me as I prepare this preaching. This is a   
familiar story and as we reflect on it and our congregation hears it   
proclaimed this weekend, conclusions will be rapidly drawn.  Many of us   
have pre-fixed positions about the episode that we tend to fall back   
into rather quickly.  Let’s try, as best we can, to hear this reading   
with fresh ears. So, for example, let’s not come crashing down on Martha   
and make her the excessively worrisome, fretful, over-worked person who   
doesn’t have time for the Lord. Everyone expects this message and they   
might feel guilty when they hear it since, in our culture, most of us   
easily identify with Martha’s work ethic and concerns. But chances are   
there is not a lot we can do about our busy, boxed-in lives.  Is there   
anyway Martha can speak to us about being Christian in our busy worlds?    
We’ll want to do more in our preaching than make people feel guilty for   
working hard and worrying about the well being of family and friends.  
  
Imagine, for example, how a single parent, or low-income couple might   
feel as they scramble to keep their family’s heads above financial   
waters.  Upon hearing this gospel they probably would love the “luxury,”   
so it would seem to them, of sitting in a contemplative place to listen   
to the Lord.  We don’t want to exclude the hard workers from hearing   
good news in today’s story.  Preachers might well treat Martha with a   
sympathetic ear, on behalf of women who work at home as well as those   
who work in the marketplace.  They offer their lives in sacrifice for   
the benefit of their children and grandchildren. Some are widowed -- was   
Martha?  
  
Recent statistics on wages show that women still don’t earn wages   
comparable to men in similar jobs. Besides their required daily labors,   
women often give time to volunteer in church and assist others in need.   
They are the “good Samaritans” who, like Mary and Martha, have listened   
to Jesus’ teachings and acted on them. So, as we prepare this preaching   
we might try to show the balance necessary to follow Jesus: we welcome   
Jesus, listen to his teachings that show where Christian service lies   
and we set about being the “neighbor” described in his parable.  
  
A word about words: another English translation of this text says Martha   
“welcomes” Jesus into her home. Initially Jesus and Martha are the focus   
of the story.  In fact, Mary doesn’t speak in this passage.  Martha   
follows the mideastern  custom of extending hospitality to the   
traveler.  We see a similar incident in the first reading as Abraham and   
Sarah offer welcome to the three strangers. Notice in the Genesis   
reading how Abraham “hastened” to tell Sarah to act “quickly” and how he   
“ran” to pick out a choice steer for a servant, who “quickly” prepared   
it.  There’s lots of rush and fuss in the first reading for the sake of   
hospitality and Abraham is not chastised for rushing about: he was doing   
what was expected for a traveler.  Martha is also following the custom   
of her ancestors in faith, who were told to welcome the stranger in   
their midst.  Both stories have a common element of welcoming the Holy   
One who comes as friend, or stranger.  Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality   
is blessed, for God is fulfilling the promise to them that their   
descendants would become a great nation (Gen. 12:1-4).  
  
By placing the Genesis and Luke accounts together the designers of the   
lectionary are offering the stories as parallels. We are being invited   
to look more deeply into these quaint sounding domestic stories.    
Abraham and Sarah will have the promised flesh and blood descendants --   
but their true descendants will be children in the spirit who trust in   
the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of the covenant, who will be with   
the people in their faith journey. So too with Mary and Martha, we are   
their descendants, we who also try to have open hearts and listening   
ears to the “guests” we welcome into our lives.  Such guests are not   
always the usual people we find on guest lists, those of equal social   
and economic ranking to our own. Rather, we who hear week after week   
these selections from Luke’s gospel, are like Mary sitting beside the   
“Lord at his feet,” listening to his teaching so as to learn how to   
“welcome” the Lord into our lives.  
  
Last Sunday we heard the teaching that immediately preceded today’s in   
Luke’ gospel -- the tale of the neighbor in need (10:25-37).  In that   
story we were, like Mary,  listeners at Jesus’ feet and we learned about   
offering hospitality and neighborliness to the one in need.  It is no   
accident that Luke places today’s episode immediately after the Good   
Samaritan. He is telling us to “listen-up!”   -- Jesus has something   
life-giving to offer us.  We too ask the lawyer’s question, “Teacher,   
what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25).  By positioning the   
Mary and  Martha story where he does, Luke is saying, in effect,   
“Welcome Jesus into your life, listen to his words about loving neighbor   
and you will learn the ways of eternal life.”  
  
The lawyer’s response to Jesus’ question, “What is written in the law?”   
came in two parts, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your   
heart, with all your being, with all your strength and with all your   
mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”  The Good Samaritan parable   
answered the question about loving neighbor; today’s account addresses   
what loving God with  our heart, being, strength and mind entails --   
attentiveness to the Lord’s word.  Neither story is complete without the   
other.  In the parable, the Samaritan “sees” the injured man; Mary is   
the one who “hears” Jesus. Remember that women were marginalized in the   
culture of the time, so were Samaritans.  Two marginalized people, a   
Samaritan and a woman, are concrete examples of those previously   
extolled by Christ for hearing the word and doing it (8:21).  
  
Jesus is referred to with the post-resurrection title “Lord”;  a clue   
for the setting of this gospel.  Using the title “Lord” for Jesus   
deliberately places this reading in the context of the early church.    
This is a story about welcoming and listening to the resurrected “Lord”   
in our midst. Also, note the double use of the word “service” in verse   
40 (“diakonia”), which refers to the church’s ministerial service. There   
was a debate about the roles of women in the early church. Possibly   
there was an issue of what constituted “women’s work” in the community   
-- as in our own church today. In Luke’s time women performed many   
ministries, apostolic work, leadership, gospel proclamation, etc.  (e.g.   
Rom 16: 1, 3-5; 16:6, 12; 1 Cor. 16:19;  Phil 4: 3).  But the epistles   
and readings like today’s show that there was a division over the roles   
of women.  It seems some wanted women to stay in subservient roles and   
that may explain Jesus’ siding with Mary. Luke has portrayed, in this   
story at least, that the silent woman has the “better part.” Was he   
trying to promote women’s silence and passivity?  I think the preacher   
may want to allude to the previously named important works women did so   
as to balance Luke’s silent and docile Mary. We should also remember   
that Mary was seated where only men were to be found, at the feet of a   
teacher.  Jesus is not letting the mores and values of his day limit him   
or restrict those who might hear him and become his disciple.  
  
Martha’s roles of welcome and service are important works of the church   
as we welcome the Lord in the stranger and person in need. There were   
many gifts among women in the early church, some like Mary’s were quiet   
disciples attentive to the words of Christ; others were very active.  In   
their own ways, both Martha and Mary welcome Christ, each has apparently   
heard his teachings and shown love to God and service to neighbor.  
  
The preacher would be wise, I think, to show how both men and women,   
with all their varied gifts, are called into service of others.  All   
Christians are called to be listeners of the Word -- something we do   
each time we gather in this liturgical assembly and listen to the   
proclamation of the Word.  We are also called to service of our   
neighbor, which we do as we leave this listening place to return to our   
busy lives.