

Are you devoted to Jesus or are you distracted by many things?

Luke 10:38-42 & Colossians 1:15-23

I wonder are you like me and find it hard to stay focused on one thing, and get it done without allowing other thoughts to creep into your mind and distract you. My mind is such that there's so many things going round in it that as I work for example on my sermon, inevitably other thoughts about what I need to do later in the day will creep in. I have to work hard at keeping focused on the main thing.

We all can be distracted and have our minds wandering. Even right now you may be beginning to think about something coming up later this week with work, or at home. Basically, all of us will have lots and lots of things that are going round and round in our heads – dates to remember, meetings to prepare for. The reality is that we give our time and attention to the things that truly matter to us. It's important to say that none of these things may be bad things, but it might be that things are in the wrong order, and we need to do a wee bit of work at ensuring the things that truly are important in life get their rightful place before the many other things creep in.

And so today we are going to have some help in dealing with this as we look at 2 sisters, Mary and Martha - and they are very different from one another. Martha in the story would be perceived as the one that makes things happen – verse 38 says that she opens her house to Jesus – she has the gift of hospitality and that's a good thing. And then we have Mary

who seems to be present simply sitting at the feet of Jesus. Actually in the context of that time, Mary was doing what the men would normally do. The women would be the ones preparing behind the scenes and the men would be the ones sitting learning and talking to the teacher. But Jesus doesn't care about cultural expectations – Jesus values Mary to sit at his feet and listen to him.

So we see 2 sisters, we see one who is distracted, and we see one who is devoted. And therefore what we are going to see this morning, and what I want us all to think about is this – Jesus is interested more in you and your relationship with him, rather than in what you do for him. Jesus is more interested in the devotion we have for him, rather than the quantity of what we do for him. Growing in your love of Jesus is more important than what activities you think you need to do for him.

I've recently been reading a book that is helping me with my thoughts on how we as a church family begin to RESET who we are in Christ and what he desires for us to be in this next chapter. The book is called *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* by Peter Scazzero and he talks about typically how many leaders in churches operate. He says this, *"Who you are is more important than what you do.....Your being with God will always trump your doing for God every time. We cannot give what we do not possess"*. In other words there's no point being active in church life, if we don't already know the Father's heart.

We live in an age where we are so prone to distraction and a million things going on in our lives. And I think Satan, the deceiver, has used the sin of busyness in our lives and in the lives of progressive churches, to distract us away from a deep relationship with God. We all know in this modern technologically age that we no longer leave work when we leave the office, we carry work in our pockets because we can still see our emails on our phones. And whilst there's work to be done, or there's leisure to enjoy, the spirit of our age pushes the devotion of Jesus out further and further from our lives. More and more I find that people are too busy with what they need to do to fit time in for the eternal things that matter the most. And even as church, we feel the need to have more things happening, more programmes running all at the same time, and yet when it comes to gathering in prayer or sitting together around God's Word then it's the least attended events in the week. Folks this morning's reading will show us that growing in our love of God is as Jesus says to Martha the better thing.

And therefore if you've not picked up on where I'm taking us into this new season, then it's this - I think God wants us as church to slow down, to take a breath, and he wants us to teach our distracted minds to be controlled by hearts that are devoted to him first. So let's look at a few lessons this morning :

The distracted mind becomes all consuming.

Verse 40 says that Martha was distracted by all the preparations. Now it's really important to say that there's

nothing wrong in serving. Jesus regularly calls his followers to Go, to Do. And for Martha, her gift of hospitality was a good thing. The problem was that she had allowed that good thing to become an all-consuming thing. The problem wasn't the issue of serving Jesus. The problem was that she allowed the service to dominate over the need to stop and to simply listen to Jesus. Martha did not distinguish between priorities. In contrast however, Mary ensured that she kept the main thing the main thing. The devoted person knows that there ultimately is one thing that must come first. Martha was building a meal for the guest, but Mary was building a relationship with the guest. Martha was busy to the point that she hadn't got to know Jesus. And in Church we can become so busy doing the church thing, that we miss out entirely on the first commandment – to love the Lord with all our heart, with our soul, and our mind.

Mary knew that she could serve later, but she could only listen now. She didn't allow the doing to become the distraction that kept her away from worshipping. And for us in our daily lives, and in our church life, this new season must be totally about this – let's never allow the doing in our lives to become a distraction to our worship and listening to Jesus. You know when I was on holiday it was great how every morning I would get up before everyone else, I'd sit with a cuppa, doing my bible readings and pray. But near the end of the holiday as we had to make a few trips to get home, and getting up earlier, the rhythm of spending that valuable time with God either was squeezed or pushed out completely. So

I'm not saying any of this is easy. There will always be a reason to not read your bible, there will always be a reason to not be part of a small group, there will always be a reason to not be part of the weekly prayer gathering, there will always be a reason to not get along to church on Sunday. And they may be good reasons, but there should be no thing that gets in the way of the ultimate thing and that is building a deeper relationship with Jesus.

So don't allow our distractions to be all consuming.

Next, the distracted mind holds on to many things, and therefore is left with nothing

In the English Standard Version translation, verse 40 says that Martha was distracted by much serving. She was moving from one task to another. By trying to get everything done she gets nothing done. She's not listening to Jesus, and she's not getting her house in order either. She is spending all of her energy all over the place but not actually making any progress. But a devoted person knows to be focused only on one thing. Notice that Mary is doing only one thing. She's listening to Jesus.

And yet in our culture today, people are acclaimed when they are able to multi-task; where they are capable of managing many different things all at the same time. In many jobs today, promotion comes to those who can appear to manage many things competently at the same time. However the truth is that no one truly multi-tasks, because in order to focus on one thing, you must take your mind off the other

thing. You can very easily spot people who multi-task, because they really don't have time for the small talk – and so whilst they may be great and getting many things done they don't have a great personality to go with it. Actually the worst type I find are those who you might be speaking to in a crowd of people, but you know that their mind is somewhere else, or even worse you know their eyes are on someone else in the room that they are more interested in – they're not actually interested in what you're saying. Martha could not remain focused on anything due to being totally overwhelmed. Mary however in our story is only focused on one thing – she is present in the moment. She may work later, but at this precise moment her attention and mind is fixed on what Jesus is teaching.

I have found in most recent times that I need to build in and discipline things into my life to ensure that I stay focused. To maybe help you or to jog your thoughts, here are a few things that I have found helpful :

- When you are reading your bible, don't have your phone nearby. And yes I know that many bible studies are now on phone apps, but try to have the physical bible in front of you so you don't become distracted by other things on your phone.
- Related to that, if you are spending time reading your bible or your bible devotion, then find somewhere away from distractions – somewhere quiet to avoid your mind wandering.

- Similarly, if you have children or family around the house and you know they are going to come in and interrupt you or pull you away to another task, then find a time in the day when you know you won't be distracted. For me I realise that if I get up earlier than everyone else it is definitely the best time. And I realise for those with young children that might mean getting up really early.
- Finally, if you have a phone that has lots of notifications coming through on it, then why not put your phone on sleep mode or do not disturb mode to ensure you have peace. It's funny that as I wrote this sermon, it was just at this point that my phone pinged at me and so my hand went straight to read the message rather than leave it until I was finished.

So what do you need in your life to become more focused? What do you need to stop doing or start doing to become focused on building a time to sit and listen to God. We really cannot multi-task Jesus. Focusing on one thing is a far better thing.

Some in the church family have asked questions about this whole RESET thing I've been talking about, and it really does boil down to us as a church not trying to do everything, and yet miss out on the thing that Mary knew was important, and Jesus knew was the better thing. Now that doesn't mean that suddenly we should stop everything that we are doing as a church, but it does mean that if we are so busy in activities that we don't have time for the important aspects of

personal and corporate devotion, then folks there's something seriously wrong.

So the distracted mind becomes all-consuming. The distracted mind loses out on achieving anything. And then finally,

The distracted mind doesn't clearly see the real priorities

Martha is upset because she believes that Mary should be helping to serve her guests. Martha is building her case for why her thing is the most important thing. Can you see what this does? It means that Martha is willing to sacrifice what's actually important for what is the most urgent. She allowed the urgent thing to take her away from what Jesus clearly determined to be the better, and Jesus can see how she has become so worried and upset about all the plates that she is spinning. Jesus understood that if she was to make devotion and learning from him the important thing, it would then make her far more effective in what she perceived as urgent. The physical food could wait, in order that the spiritual food was given out to those in the house who needed inner strengthening.

Martha allowed her agenda to dominate her thoughts, to think that actually the food was the thing that Jesus would want most, rather than hear from her guest what he believed to be the most important thing. She doesn't have time to consider what Jesus might have wanted. She already has a plan that she wants to have executed. So for us, we can get so caught up in the urgent needs of life, that we neglect the

importance of building our relationships with Jesus and so over time, our relationship with Jesus become cold. Isn't it funny that Martha in verse 40 addresses Jesus as Lord, and yet she goes on to speak to him about what she thinks is important.

You see each Sunday we can call out that Jesus is Lord. We can declare through our words and songs that he is the Lord of our lives, but when it comes to the rest of the week, when it comes to how we use our time wisely, when it comes to what is important and what is urgent, does he become the Lord in each decision we make? The other appointed reading from the Lectionary for today gives us a real perspective on why Mary's decision was the better one. Paul writing to the Colossians tells us that in Jesus all things were created in heaven and earth. Jesus was before all things, and in him all things hold together. And so we in our busy lives can hold on to many things that distract us, and yet today's two readings calls us back to Jesus who Paul writes must have the supremacy if he truly is Lord.

Martha had made herself Lord in the priorities she was determining for that day, and for all of us it is so easy to fall into the same trap. I know for me I have realised more and more that if I don't start my day with reaching to scripture, then I can keep calling Jesus as my Lord, but really in my heart I have already determined that other things are more important in my day. If I waken up and reach for my phone and go straight onto Facebook, or onto the news channels, or into my emails, rather than getting up and disciplining myself

to go straight to God's Word then I know my day is not going to go as well as what it could. Remember that if you don't determine to set your priorities, then someone or some thing will set them for you. Jesus knew that there were many things pressing on Martha's agenda, but he said that only one thing was actually needed, and that was him.

Martha had allowed all the other things to crowd in on her. And for any one who is distracted, they become overwhelmed, and things get out of control. We can all feel as though we are able to juggle the many things in life, but the reality is that it's more full of burden. In the busyness we lose our joy in life. If today you feel like things are spinning out of control, know that this is not Jesus' plan for you. You see Mary's devotion, shows us that a recalibration of our lives, a RESET of our lives towards Jesus brings us rest. Isn't that what Jesus said to us in Matthew 11:28 "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest". Let me read this same passage from the Message Translation and consider whether this is where you are at today. ""Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me— watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Now who doesn't long for that simplicity in the busyness and distraction of this life? That's what the Lord longs for us to do, to rest in him. And that's what I believe he wants us to do

as Church. In order to serve him we have to be devoted to him. How possibly can we go and serve if we are not gazing on his presence? Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet – what an amazing picture of rest. It's not that Mary's list was any different than Martha's - rather she understood the important place of Jesus first in order to serve. We've got to give access to time with Jesus before anything else distracts. The book I have been reading says this, "*Bearing fruit requires slowing down enough to give Jesus direct access to every aspect of our lives and our leadership. Just because God has access to everything that is true about us, does not mean God has access to us*".

Folks in this distracting world of do, do, do, let's be careful that the things we believe to be urgent don't take away from that which is most important. Jesus wants his love to come afresh into us for this new season as a church. He cares more about our relationship with him than on the programmes and the many things that occupy our time. He is speaking to us in tenderness as he did with Martha. He's saying stop, just stop. Sit down, listen to me again. How do we do that as a church? We come before him first in repentance, and then seek after him. " Chronicles 7:14, the Lord says this to his people and to use today, "*if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*".

I pray into this next season that each of us can take the time to stop and listen to Jesus, that above all else we are marked

in our devotion to him. We talk about our mission around Ballyclare, but anything we do for Jesus must flow from our devotion to him. We can be a church that does so much, and is so known for reaching out, but it will count for nothing if we are not committed to devotion. Is Jesus the Lord of our lives today, and if so what changes need to be made to make the eternal matters the important matters.

As a prayer to lead each of us in what our response should be, we are going to sing this song that I taught us at the beginning – To be in your presence. Let's remain seated as we sing this prayerfully and consider our response.

To be in your presence
To sit at your feet
When your love surrounds me
And makes me complete

This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire
This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire

To rest in your presence
Not rushing away
To cherish each moment
Here I would stay