JULY 20th

THE NEW SHOFAR

Jesus didn't eat with sinners because he wanted to appear inclusive, tolerant and accepting. He ate with them to call them to a changed way of living, to die to self and live for him. His call is to a transformation of life, not an affirmation of identity.

Hospitality a core biblical value

The prevailing culture across the East was that a person turning up on our doorstep was a welcomed guest, someone sent to them by God. Thus hospitality becomes a sacred duty. When Abraham entertained three strangers who proved to be angels, he showed much the same attitude. His enthusiasm in receiving the guests reflected his faith, his belief that those he was to entertain were sent to him by the Lord. This is why the narrative tells how he "ran to meet" the three men, that he "rushed off "to the tent of Sarah" to get her to make ready food, that he "ran unto the herd," and that he "fetched a calf," and that he "hasted to dress it" (**Gen. 18:2-7**).These details are there to heighten our awareness of the significance of what is unfolding.

For the people of Israel, the foundations of hospitality were tied to their own special relationship of dependence and gratitude to God. Israel's duty to extend hospitality to strangers grew out of their own experiences as aliens in foreign lands. The believed that guests might be angels or messengers from God, bringing divine promise or provision. Hospitality was ingrained in the fibre of the community as a sign of God's presence and was understood as an embodiment of biblical ethics.

Martha, Mary and the village gossips

Given Bethany is only 3 kilometres from Jerusalem, and it was the home of the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary with whom Jesus seemed to have had a special relationship, it is likely everyone in the village knew of Jesus and celebrated him at least as a famous rabbi, holy man and miracle worker. This meant that pressure was on to ensure the fullest expression of hospitality would be the standard accepted. The reputation of the entire village was at stake here and it is not difficult to imagine some of the villagers would be watching and evaluating all that was done or not done. There would also have been some who imagined they would have been better and more appropriate hosts in preference to Martha and Mary. What was of primary importance was the breadth and depth of their hospitality. Reputations were at stake. To fail there represented a failure that would echo down through the history of the town as shame. This means the pressure is on the household, but one thing becomes clear I the narrative. The focus is on the wrong set of priorities.

According to Jesus, hearing the word of God's messenger is the one thing needed, not the prioritising of the social customs and laws of the day. This is why the Bible has stories of God sending strangers to a town or to a household. It is God's way

of giving a message or some directions. It did not matter if the entire village castigated Martha for the poor quality of the hospitality. The one thing that mattered was "being with Jesus, being prepared for Jesus to offer to them the "hospitality" of God's Kingdom.

Faithfulness not fanaticism

In the New Testament, there is a special word for sin: *hamartía*. It means "missing the mark," like shooting at a target and missing. God gives us principles and circumstances to guide us in virtue and truth, but we can go wrong on either side of the target. Martha and Mary are illustrations of the extremes (missing the target to one side or the other). Mary is contemplative and inactive; Martha is active and anxious. Christians are called to be contemplative and active.

In this scene in our Gospel reading, Jesus, the Word of God, Wisdom Incarnate, is there in Martha's house and the laws on hospitality are important. But some things take priority over other things. Martha was burdened with the stress of being seen as offering the fullness of Jewish hospitality. But Martha did not have to go all out in the festivities, her attention should be on what is important.

Sometimes, many times, we get all worked up about what is what is not important, and then we end up too anxious and worked up to pay attention to the most important thing, losing sight of "why" we are acting. Martha was so fixated on hospitality and society's expectations that she was missing out on the one to whom she was showing hospitality. Doing took the place of hearing.

On the other side, Mary might have provided some support to Martha before Jesus arrived, made sure that they had everything ready (of course, we don't know that she didn't). Mary's end of the spectrum is as empty of a frenzy of doing, of keeping up appearances. We can be so interior, so wrapped up in our own thoughts, that we do not getting round to doing much of anything. Sometimes it is good to be quiet and still; sometimes it is good to be active and busy, but only when those are the correct responses to the situation. In this situation, Mary had the right response.

This is not just about balancing out our action and our contemplation. We want to make sure that our action flows *from* our contemplation. Our external activity should be the outward fruit of the internal activity of our relationship with God. We can be doing a lot of things. But if we are doing without adequate praying, then how sure are we that we are doing the will of God? Is what we are worried about worth the anguish, or when all is said and done, it is unimportant? Are we focused on the storm through which we are struggling, or are we keeping our eyes on the Lord who can calm the storm? Are we putting first things first, and everything in its proper priority? Or are we just choosing as we want, or worse, letting circumstances (the urgent fires to be put out) choose for us? Do we allow the priorities and expectations of the world shape the way we live or is the way we live and who we are determined by God-within us?