

HOMILY FOR THE 16TH SUNDAY OT, CYCLE C (2019)

July 20, 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the first time a human being first set foot on the moon.

Maybe those of us who were living at the time of this event don't think much about it any more.

Those born after the event may take it for granted.

I was an elementary school student at the time and the whole space program leading up to the lunar landing was fascinating to me.

For people living at the time of this great event in human history it seemed unbelievable that it was happening.

So what did people do? They crowded around the television, very often the one television in the household, to listen to the broadcast and watch the historic moment.

Of course some people had to work, but those who were able to do so set aside their normal daily activities to focus their attention on that monumental moment in world history.

In the Gospel reading today we hear about a woman named Mary who sets aside the normal routines of daily life to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him speak.

The episode in Luke's Gospel emphasizes that her taking time to listen to Jesus is an indispensable activity for a disciple.

As we consider the message the Gospel passage intends to deliver to us it is important to remember that Luke's primary characterization of Jesus is that he is a great prophet.

Prophets seek to draw people's attention to God's word.

The Old Testament prophets used both powerful words and symbolic actions to direct people to hear the word of the Lord.

Often these symbolic actions are extraordinary, such as Ezekiel's making a hole in the wall of Jerusalem and crawling through it with his belongings to warn the people that if they don't change their ways they are sure to become exiles.

There are some surprising elements of the Gospel scene which we may not have noticed.

That Jesus is teaching is not unusual, but that the disciple at his feet is a woman, and a lone woman at that, is astonishing.

This is perhaps the reason that Martha is so upset.

It is not so much that her sister is not helping her with the details of hospitality, but that Mary is engaging in a behavior that is unexpected for a woman, and Martha is perhaps embarrassed.

She may be even wondering why Jesus would put himself in a situation that would call his own behavior into question.

This is not the first time in Luke's story, however, that Jesus engages in behavior that cuts against the social norms.

He had dinner in the home of Levi the tax collector, who was considered a public sinner.

He also allowed his disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath, when such activity was, according to the interpretation of the Pharisees, a violation of the law against work on the Sabbath.

In each case when Jesus does something in contrast to the social norms of the day he explains his behavior by offering a lesson about the Kingdom of God.

By surprisingly allowing a lone woman to sit at his feet as a disciple listening to his teaching conveys several messages about the Kingdom that is present in Jesus.

First, there are no gender barriers to discipleship; women are among the mass of human beings to whom salvation is offered.

Secondly, listening to the word of Jesus is essential for a person to be a disciple.

The word of Jesus transcends any social customs or secular prohibitions of it.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI expressly pointed out that dictatorships that were arising in Europe after World War I that were suppressing religious freedom and excluding the message of Christ from public discourse were engaging in an act of grave injustice.

We might even question some of the ways that the freedom of religion, guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution, is being eroded in our own time.

Finally, it is important to note that Luke has placed the Martha and Mary episode after the parable of The Good Samaritan, which we heard last weekend.

By means of that parable, Jesus teaches his inquisitor, disciples and the crowds about him that active service of one's neighbor in need is essential to life in the Kingdom.

But today's Gospel episode balances that call to action with the call to contemplation.

We have to take time to put aside our involvement in Christian action to hear the word of the Lord.

Without taking time to listen to the Lord's word, Christian action loses its focus.

So, for example, let's take someone who is a religion teacher or, if you prefer, youth formator.

Surely the formator must engage in the activities of preparing class and actively teaching the students or they will not receive the message.

But Christian teachers must also be formed themselves, by the Lord's word.

Before anyone can teach the message they must first have received and embraced it.

But even beyond knowing what the Lord has said, a good teacher must also know the Lord.

Christian teachers must allow themselves to be inundated with the Lord's word, it has not only to fill their heads but to touch the depths of their hearts.

They must let the Lord's message engage their lives in a way that draws them closer into union with the Lord and make his vision of the Kingdom their own.

The same may be said of those who engage in any active ministry in the Church.

This is one of the reasons that we have to take time out of each day to sit at the Lord's feet as Mary does and listen to his word.

It is also one reason that we come to Mass at least every Sunday.

Here, we listen to the Lord speak to us in the readings and the prayers.

He either instructs us newly or reaffirms what we have known and believed.

Then we commemorate the triumph of his death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit in the Liturgy of the Eucharist to remind ourselves that our power and wisdom to do the ministry we do comes from grace that flows from these events.

While there are certain events in life which cause us to stop and listen to the news, today's Gospel reading tells us that it is even more important to take time to stop and listen to the Lord amid not only the busyness of daily life, but even in the midst of active Christian service.