

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Genesis 18:1-10A

Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5

Colossians 1:24-28

Luke 10:38-42

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

In our Gospel, Jesus visits the home of his friends Martha and Mary. While Martha is being run-ragged serving the meal, her sister Mary simply sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him talk. When Martha complains about Mary's behavior, Jesus famously replies that "Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her." An English friend, Fr. Russell Frost, observes wryly of the incident, "When our Lord makes this remark, he has doubtless already been served his dinner."

What's going on here? Surely Jesus isn't saying that selfless care for the practical needs of others is unimportant? Just think of our first reading in which Abraham and Sarah are so richly rewarded for their generous hospitality to strangers. In the New Testament, think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Or how about the miracle of the loaves and fishes? When Jesus realizes that the people who have walked miles to see him and hear him speak are hungry, he doesn't say, "Oh well, that doesn't matter. The important thing is that they hear my words." No, he intervenes miraculously to make sure that everyone gets more than enough to eat. Our care for each other is clearly important. So, the lesson we are intended to draw from Jesus' remark must be that as important as our service of each other is, there is something even more important. This *most* important thing is to seek out Christ where he is to be found, and listen to his word.

It's a lesson that Catholics have generally learned well. That's why the Mass and the Eucharist are so important to us. Once, years ago, I had the opportunity to preach at a Mass in a remote Ugandan village. Beforehand, the local catechist urged me to preach at sufficient length. He said that many in the congregation had walked for two or three hours to get to Mass, and would afterward be faced with the same trek home. If I preached for less than half an hour they would think their efforts had been insufficiently rewarded. You'll be relieved to hear that it's advice I won't be following in this reflection.

Coming to Mass is so important because it is there that we can do what Mary does - there that we can seek our Lord out and sit at his feet and listen. We meet him in the Eucharist. He speaks to each of us in the proclamation of the Gospel and, yes, in the homily. "A day spent in in your temple, Lord, is worth a thousand elsewhere."

But we can't be gathered in worship all the time. Nor are we meant to be. Having imitated Mary for a while, we have to go out the church doors, make our trek to the parking lot, and start imitating Martha. We need to imitate her in selfless service of the people God sends our way, struggling to put their needs before our own, even when doing so seems to run against the grain. And like Martha, we do so in the knowledge that we are serving Christ, who said, "Whatever you do to for *least* of these, you do *to* me.