

Luke 10:38-42

Just over there, in the north transept, is the biggest single window in the Cathedral. Night after night I stand and look at it as I wait for the evensong congregation to finish their final prayers. Night after night I stand beneath that window and I feel faintly shifty.

Let me explain. There is a text across the bottom of the window: *Go and do thou likewise*. It was the motto of Edward Colston (the window is a memorial to Colston). *Go and do thou likewise*, it comes from the parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard last week (Luke 10:37). So, there are pictures of the Good Samaritan above the text. This window has a point to make. Right at the top a soldier, a centurion kneeling before the King of glory surrounded by the words *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me*. (Matthew 25:45). This window is insistent; it wags its finger at us. *Be nice, be good*.

In fact this window is but a shadow of its former self. It was extensively remodelled to a rather loose specification by a Mr Hermann Goering in 1940. Originally, there were more pictures, more people; there were acts of mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and so on) and the Sermon on the Mount, Christ blessing little children and more besides. This window was always meant to tell you that Christianity is about looking busy and doing good.

And that is what makes me feel shifty. Night by night at evensong I give the day back to God. 'You gave this to me, thank you, I have tried to do my best with it... bless what went well, forgive the bits that were not quite so good'. Then, still chewing over that business of marks for effort on my day I stand under that finger wagging window, *Go and do thou likewise* Night after night I look and I read and I murmur back 'Lord, I really tried'.

All this because, last week, on that vivid day of choir valedictions and Canon Wendy's retirement we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan and today we hear the very next verses of Luke's gospel. Today it was Martha distracted by her many tasks

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

Last week it was the lawyer who asked Jesus 'What must I do?' And, Wendy told us that after the lawyer recited the commandments, Jesus said, 'You have given the right answer'. Now, there are all kinds of temptations, but for religious people *this* is where we most often get into trouble. 'Just tell me Lord what I have to do and then tell me that I have done it well'. That was what the lawyer was after. It was the great failing of the Pharisees, the most religious people of Jesus' day; they turned religion into an activity that you could mark out of ten. God in his grace invites us to follow Jesus and live life fully and we immediately look for a handbook, the detail, the small print, a strategy – 'What must I do?' Think of Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration seized with a brilliant plan to build altars just as Jesus calls them to move on Matthew 17:4). Think of Thomas urging the others into raising the stakes and making it dramatic, *Let us also go, that we may die with him* (John 11:16). Worst of all, think of Judas, and the brilliant challenge he launches on the invitation just to love Jesus "*Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?*" (John 12:5). Disciples keep making discipleship into a job, they ask for a task and, notice, they want it to look impressive. Jesus invites us to follow and we start devising a form with goals and a space for signatures.

Let's be clear, before you all start looking at me with narrowed eyes and furrowed brows. Doing a good thing is a good thing to do. We should feed the hungry and visit the sick. We really should. The Colston window is not wrong, but today we do have to pause and ask ourselves what we are doing and why. We have to do that because Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, but it was her sister Mary who sat at his feet to listen.

Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things

It was Martha who invited Jesus in. She made the right beginning; she had eyes to see and a heart that could hope. Then she succumbed to the great temptation; she started to make an effort she tried to get it right.

Just exactly what is the problem here? What is wrong with making an effort? Well, evil is subtle and evil is clever. So now you do might to narrow your eyes and furrow your brows. The simple answer would just be that we keep doing the wrong thing; we end up doing *this* when we should be doing *that*. 'Lord tell me what to do' 'Lord just explain, should I stop doing the housework and sit and listen instead?' That would be neat. Just find the right thing to do and then do that. It is worth thinking about. All those good things that Edward Colston did, the almshouses, the philanthropy, the schools and pretty well all paid for out of the slave trade. Good deeds are complicated things, motives, ends and means and so on. We can do the wrong thing when we meant to do the right thing. That though is not even the half of it.

Evil is subtle, evil is clever and it always dresses itself up to look good. The real problem here is with our very seriousness, our very desire to 'get it right'. Serious about being a father, being a husband, being a Dean I can make lists, have plans, outcomes, measures of success and before I know it I have not just missed the point entirely I have tuned inwards, it is myself that I am talking to, not my son, not my wife, not my Lord and my God.

Remember the story of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer is deadly serious, 'What should I do?' Jesus answers with 'Love God, Love your neighbour'. That is not quite serious enough for the lawyer – "And who, precisely, is my neighbour?" Which prompts the story of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer wants to know what exactly to do. Jesus answers that there is no *exactly*. It is life you have to live: Love God, love your neighbour; indeed love all your neighbours, even the ones lying at the side of the road.

Evil is subtle, evil is clever and it always dresses itself up to look good. Jesus invites us to love God and one another and we ask, in all seriousness, 'How precisely?' We look for something more, we turn in on ourselves. One of my favourite poets is a priest he described priests going on retreat to a house in the Lake District, searching for something in the Library

The fresh air did not seem to give them.

In a wonderful line he talks about these priests trying to 'narrow down the glory', he means that terrible habit of trying to make things *manageable*. The poem ends

*It took a week
For them to assume a theology of creation
Longer still to skim a pebble over the lake*

We get specific and we get hung up on the targets that we have devised. I was re-reading the Screwtape Letters the other day. Again and again the devils are trying to persuade human beings to be 'realistic' that is to ask the little questions, forget the good and the great. Listen to this

Music and silence — how I detest them both! ... no square inch of infernal space and no moment of infernal time has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces, but all has been occupied by Noise — Noise... We will make the whole universe a noise in the end... The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end.

All the effort amounting to nothing, all the great simplicity made complicated. We are asked to follow Christ and love one another and it is too much, so we opt for projects. And the worst of it is that the

great project becomes *me* and my obsession with *myself*, how well I am doing and then, worse still, the absurd desire that I should be doing slightly better than you.

Have you read this week that the government now wants to test five year olds so that we can benchmark them? Isn't it bad enough that we make our lives competitions without wishing that in our children? We make treadmills of the spirit and call it gospel or accountability. Jesus comes to set us free.

The gospel, the lesson Martha had to learn is precisely that there is nothing for us to do. Rowan Williams once said

The church is a community that exists because something has happened which makes the entire process of self-justification irrelevant

We depend on God and on forgiveness. Horrified by that, we throw up earthworks and barricades, we keep ourselves busy, we think there must be a system – a trick. There is no system, just life and the grace of God. When Mark Twain studied to be a pilot amidst the shifting shapes of the Mississippi he said

Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours.

No amount of Martha mania will get you there, just grace and the life of Christ.

Enough for one morning. If you are scratching your head and wondering what I have been saying. I have been saying we should do good things, but we must not mistake that for the gospel. The gospel is not what I do, it is not what Martha did. The gospel is the grace of God at work in the life of Christ. Martha let him in, but Mary sat and looked and listened. That was the better part. As Edward Colston should have said *Go and do thou like wise.*