

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR C

Martha's and Mary's different responses to the presence of Jesus invite a comment on the age old debate of valuation between action and contemplation. Which is the better way to live: actively or contemplatively? Are action and contemplation necessarily at odds, or can a person hope to attain a balance between them? These and a number of other related questions are concerned with the essence of a life well lived.

The poet John Milton thought the contemplative way was the harder path of to follow, the active way the easier and more alluring one. In contemporary society, any sense of balance or complementarity between action and contemplation has long since receded. The most visible manifestations of our twenty-first century culture celebrate action. Yet, there are real costs to constant busyness, to frantically running to and fro, (real costs) to working or being available 24-7. As the ancient philosopher Seneca put it, "Delight in bustling is not energy – it is only the restlessness of a hunted mind." So, even as we worship action, we are anxious about its excesses.

The dream of escaping to simpler and slower places and times persists. We almost instinctively still seek contemplative release, even if we remain unsure how to incorporate it into our busy lives.

Jesus is the best model a person balancing action and contemplation. Jesus prayed – sometimes all night; but that is no more than a parent who prays all night waiting for a child to come home. And much less than some religious in monasteries and cloisters who spend nearly all of their waking hours in prayer.

Jesus acted. He fed people, but not nearly as many as food pantries do now. He cured some people, but no more than a hospital heals in a week. He was kind to the poor and the outcasts, but maybe not noticeably more so than modern social workers and community organizations.

If, then, we cannot get to the core of the holiness and human balance of Jesus by what he did, perhaps what he did not do will help us. He was not obsessed with possessions. Still, maybe he had a home; and he did have a seamless robe: which he did not cut in half to give a beggar, as St. Martin did. Jesus loved the poor, but he did not sell himself into slavery to free them, as St. Peter Claver did. He cured lepers, but he did not choose to live with them, as St. Peter Damien did.

People of every age have seen great value in being untainted by worldly things, the way Jesus was. Jesus was supremely unattached to things of this world, but if left at face value, it is merely a negative quality – it does not create a positive way of life. What Jesus had, and what each of us needs, is a center of integrity, something to focus a person spiritually. For Jesus, that was the Kingdom of God. His vocation, his work, his passion was the Kingdom. That is what determined whether he went to Jericho or Cana on Tuesday, whether he prayed or slept all night, whether he cured someone or ignored their plea. The Kingdom was his food and drink, what made him get up in the morning and labor all day.

What we *do* is not who we *are*. Who we are is determined by the state of our relationships. Jesus is himself related to every human being who ever lived or ever would live. And he sees people not merely as humans, but as sisters and brothers. Deeper, he related to them as children of God, the God whom he recognized as his own personal Father.

So, the balance between action and contemplation in Jesus began with his personal divine life in the Father. And that created his special relationship with every person; and that relationship took practical shape in his mission of preaching the Kingdom. Even what may have looked like random activities were somehow ramifications of his basic spirituality.

It is the same with us. Our basic balance comes from who we are with God and other people. In this life we cannot separate the two. That relationship is worked out within the framework of our individual vocations. Our virtues are built up around our responsibilities and our prayers.

Obtaining a healthy balance between action and contemplation, between works and prayer, is simpler than it might seem. Not necessarily easier, but much more productive, much more honest, less likely to prove self-deceiving and groundless.