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*Unnoticed, forgotten, behind us stands another child, transfixed by the sound of a thrush, gripped by the beauty of a daffodil, just standing and standing, still.*

*Which is a little like our lives in 2024, rushing after the next novelty and seeing nothing worthy of our attention, nothing deserving our love.*

*So, simply, stop and see. So, simply, still yourself –*

*to let yourself be found by the one who is love.*

At the start of our day I want to offer you these words, printed on page 11 of your booklet, as something to keep thinking about and coming back to over the course of the day. The other place we are going to begin is Luke 10.38-42, the story of Mary and Martha.

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But 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; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”*

I am conscious that the way I am focusing on busyness, on rush, on noise, on instant gratification is not the case for everyone- for some people the main issue they face every day is isolation, lack of company. But isolation doesn’t automatically necessarily lead to deliberate stillness and time with God, which is what this reading is really about. It repays our attention. On an obvious level the story is saying that the better way is stillness than rush and busyness, and portraying a particular identity.

Martha seems as keen on everyone noticing how useful and busy she is as to actually do the work. She is, as we are, troubled about many things. But the bigger point of the encounter is that everything we do must come out of our rootedness in Jesus himself. It is not that serving people is wrong- this extract from Luke comes immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan so Luke is categorically not saying that how we treat people or care for people is not important- but he is saying that our motivation and our priorities matter, and it matters that we know that our core and our centre are God. We do what we do in his strength not our own. We see the world through his eyes not our own. It is his love we share, spread, show and not our own. That is the heart of this story, rooted and found in stillness, and attention, and rest.

But let’s be honest. Stillness is not that exciting. Stillness is just not that productive. You can’t measure it. You can’t really boast about it. It doesn’t have an output. When people ask “What have you done today?” we want to list off how much we have achieved, how well we have invested every single successive second. I don’t know when it started, where we got things so wrong, but we have somehow created a world where we are measured by the number of emails we send rather than the actual effect we have. We boast about how busy we are, how much we have to do and how little spare time we have left. We are driven by anxiety and we dare not rest.

Busyness screams for our attention. It is like an energy drink, fizzing in a brightly coloured bottle, doing everything it can to be noticed. You will feel so much better when you spend time with me- there is so much to rush past, so much to get done. Unnoticed, shyly, quietly, contentedly, stillness gets on with paying deep attention, truly noticing things, giving fulsome thanks. Stillness is utterly in the moment, in the present, not looking for the next thing but happily seeing the beauty in everything. And stillness is open, like Mary, to what God wants us to see, wants us to do, where God wants us to be.

Life is very often frantic rush. The stimulus, the things that need doing, never end. The internet never ends. The garden, the cleaning, the emails never end. The things vying for our attention never end. Life, we fancy, we is a race, a competition, a challenge, an opportunity to achieve as much as possible.

But the input and the demands never end. There is always something to be done. Once we start running it so hard to stop.

My personal rush is around emails. I have a number in my head and I should never have more emails in my inbox than that number. And when I do I feel unsettled, out of sorts, until I have worked through them and got them below this number again. I know that nothing would happen if I had 3 more emails there than I want for a day or two but I still worry about it, am bothered about it. And it doesn’t matter if replying to emails is more important than other things I might choose to do. And it doesn’t matter if replying to those emails actually helps move things forward- all that matters is getting the number of emails down to the right number. Which is a bit like bailing out a hole on the beach with a plastic spade, hoping to keep the tide back.

The person who pays the price for this busyness, this rush, this addiction to short-term and shallow achievement, is me, and is us. We aren’t made for cheap thrills. Our relationship with God does not thrive in the shallows. Our souls are deeper than that. Our attention span is longer than that. We are built for deep relationship, for true attention, for stillness and all of the fulfilment that stillness brings.

Stillness is not only a gift. It is also a necessity for us. We have to make space for it- as we walk, as we wake, as we go to bed- not just an absence of noise and movement but deep attention to our world and dep attention to God. Stillness matters so very much- it roots us in our self, in our world, and in our God. It allows us to listen to our own soul, and to the world around us which is constantly sending us messages, and to God who won’t compete with the busyness we so often prefer and won’t scream over the top of the noise we surround ourselves with but simply waits for us to be ready. Busyness screams- stillness whispers.

The ringing phone will wait. The list of jobs will wait. The emails piling up in the inbox will wait. The health of our souls will not. The beauty of the world will not. The love of God will not. And they deserve our attention. They deserve our time. They deserve our stilling, our stillness, our being still.

And perhaps one day we will compete to be still, proudly boast of how much time we spent listening to the birds in our garden, state with a smile how little output we have managed today because we chose to be still and spend time with God.

Perhaps out of today will come a revolution which changes society and, like the Beatitudes, turns culture upside down until the whole community is made up of people who notice what stillness is attending to and learns to tune out the attention-seeking of busyness until busyness itself comes over to see what we are all doing and notices the flower and the bird and learns to slow down, as if fed caramely chocolate by the rabbit in the Cadbury’s advert. Maybe we can stop the competition. Maybe we can stop the lemming-like rush. Maybe we can choose to do things a little differently and in doing so change the world.

But to be honest, the world is not our concern. It is a big place and we are quite small, quite local, quite tired. Martha is troubled about many things and Jesus says Sit and rest, like Mary. Sit and listen. The world is not our concern in this moment.

Today my concern is my own soul and yours is yours. My concern is how I get to spend time with God and so is yours. Our concern is how we do Lent well. Our concern is whether we are being slow enough, still enough, to listen properly to God. My concern is letting go of the anxiety I feel about the number of emails in my box and remembering that I am more than the number of emails I manage to send in a day and how late at night I can do them and yours is, well, whatever yours is.

Let’s step away from the computer and the jobs list and go outside, to stand in the garden, where two children are playing. If we just quietly go and stand near the still one and see what they are looking at and see what else is there, and what beauty there is in the everyday, and what we can hear, and how our beathing sounds, then it is very possible that we will find God there, or God will find us.

And it is possible that the loud one, the energetic pushy one, will come and see what we have found too. Stillness whispers. And perhaps busyness can stop screaming long enough to hear that whisper too if we have the courage, if we have the determination, if we have the focus to listen too. To listen to the world. To listen to ourselves. And to listen above all and always to the gentle, tender, moving, beautiful voice of Love.

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*Prayer*