

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

*Preached on Lunar Communion Sunday
Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 21st July 2019*

At approximately 2:30 in the morning, a three year-old boy was roused from his slumber. Brought downstairs he could hardly keep his bleary eyes open as he watched the small grey television set in the corner of the room bringing back pictures from a venue some quarter of a million miles away. "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" didn't really impact on his young brain - at least, not immediately.

Twelve months later it was a different story. There were pictures of the moon, Armstrong and Aldrin on the wall as he recovered from a bout of measles. Asked what he would like as a gift to cheer him up he replied that he wanted a model of the helicopter that had picked up astronauts Lovell, Haise and Swigert from the sea after their return from Apollo 13 a few months earlier. That was the beginning of my life-long love of space, and is the reason why I studied astrophysics at university long before God's calling took me by the collar and changed my life-path.

Many people - approximately 600 million - watched the moon landing live. Most have seen it in some form or other since. The names of Armstrong and Aldrin are known over the whole world. However, far fewer people remember the third member of the crew - Michael Collins. His job was to remain in the service module which remained in lunar orbit for the duration of the mission in order to link up to the returning lunar module (always assuming that Armstrong and Aldrin managed to blast off from the moon). Some have said that it was the loneliest job in the world, sitting there waiting for 21 hours before he would be able to see his cremates again. 21 hours wondering if he would be the only one returning from the expedition.

His last words to the two men as they separated from the command module was "Keep talking guys". Collins listened and provided the link between Tranquillity base and the earth. He listened, while Armstrong and Aldrin were engaged in activity.

We see a parallel in today's Gospel story. Jesus visits Martha and her sister Mary. In these two individuals we see two different types of person: Martha who is doing what she needs to as a good hostess and Mary who is caught up in the moment, hooked on every one of Jesus' words, no doubt learning something new and experiencing true joy in the process. Martha even complains to Jesus, "Don't you care that I'm doing all the work and Mary's doing bugger all?" or whatever the equivalent phrase would have been.

Poor Martha -both literally and figuratively! Not only is she tiring herself out by doing, she is also missing out on the conversation. So busy preparing the table and not listening to the word of God. And remember, Martha is not some kind of villain or awful person in this story. She is simply caught up in the daily realities of life. In that

way she is like all of us in the many areas of our lives. Mary, on the other hand, has chosen the better part; sitting, listening. She will never be the same again.

Busy-ness does not allow for us to be open and be well. It can be the fatal element in our lives that keeps us hung up so that we may well miss the boat, and miss the point of the actual preparation experience. There are times when the essentials of hospitality and thoughtfulness are all that matter. This can be particularly true here in church.

We watch every week as those who prepare the altar for the Eucharist do their thing. We watch all the rituals of placing sufficient bread (as the Book of Common Prayer puts it) on the corporal - that small square of cloth that's only real purpose is to catch crumbs. We see the sacred ministers preparing the admixture of water and wine resembling the dual nature of Christ - both human and divine. But that's not all. Even before the service has begin, there is so much has to be done to make sure that everything will run smoothly, from testing the microphones to ensuring the intercessor has the sick list for this week. And why shouldn't it take all that time, energy and trouble? After all, it is the meal that will be hosted by the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Yet, we have all had the experience of being in churches where people are extremely rigid and nervous about all that goes on at the altar - the churches that forget that the original Last Supper was not a religious ritual in it's modern sense, but was simply the culmination of a large meal. We are forced to wonder if those churches are keeping in mind the true meaning of what happens at the altar each time we come together as community to celebrate the meal together, or whether it is simply a performance being critiqued.

Just like the meal held at Martha and Mary's house and any that we attend at the houses of our friends, the Eucharistic meal is the ultimate opportunity to fortify ourselves. Our preparation and hospitality should be at its most sincere, but our hearts, minds, and spirits must be so open that the ritualistic trappings don't hang us up. Hospitality must reign in such a way that the stranger will know that he or she is welcome at this table. The stranger, along with everyone else, will know what it is to hear the whole story that we tell of Jesus at the Table.

And that is one of the key aspects of our hospitality. We are called to make the door of our home this church wide open to everyone. Literally. God's command is to invite all, regardless of their background, their race or their beliefs. We are to invite those with tattered finery; those older; those younger; those female; those male; those heterosexual; those lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; those white, those brown, black, and everything in between; those who are well physically and those who live with physical challenges; those who are Christian and those of other or no beliefs. In the process, with all at the table, we will hear much and learn much. The Kingdom of God will come down many times over, and we will realize that we have chosen the better part, and because of our hospitality to whoever crosses the threshold of this building we will never be the same again.