

We never really know the results of our actions – which is all to the good for it leaves room for surprises over which we have no control; it leaves room for God and God is mystery. This doesn't mean we have to be without plans, without actions – totally contemplative in the sense of doing nothing except waiting on God's initiative – there is a time for a period of prayer to end and for just getting on with the day though again we should not be so sure that the two activities are not really one after all. Perhaps they only appear to be distinct in our human desire to understand reality by categorisation – by disassembling the whole in order to make it easier to understand. Abraham gets up and rushes out to serve those three men who suddenly appear at his doorstep in the heat of the day – with no other plan than to make them welcome. It's a pure act spurred on no doubt by the customs of the day but still an action that Abraham wants to do, chooses to do, whatever the cultural demand or consequences – a pure act as opposed to a calculated one. And this opens him to mystery – again not like prayer as a calculated means of getting God on one's side, of getting God's favour – if I do good, good will come to me (often it doesn't and worse may come) but in this moment this is what I want to do, and it gives me joy to do it – though even that joy is not calculated. Can we relate this at all to Mary and Martha, and even perhaps to that extraordinary remark of Paul that, in today's translation says

*'It makes me happy to suffer for you as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church (Col 1.24).*

Mary and Martha may appear to be treated differently by Jesus – Mary's contemplative attention praised and Martha's distracted service criticised but Jesus' concern is not to contrast two sets of activities so much perhaps as to reassure them in both- someone has to minister to the guests but to do so in a distracted sense it to sully the pure action possible in the service of another, the joy of simply doing what needs to be done – the joy of serving without calculating the cost or the consequences, the joy of entering the mystery of God's spontaneity, the joy of life that's within God's gift and not our own – not something we do but enter in to, something we are and so on. This is not an argument for 'doormat Christianity' where one person abuses another by leaving them to do all the work but for taking personal responsibility for one's own action at any particular moment whether it be rushing out to greet someone or staying apart in prayer. The spontaneity comes with attention to the needs of another, whether that be one's neighbour or one's God, that is with the attention to the possibility of love, that is to the de-centring necessary if we are ever to get beyond our own concerns. Is that perhaps what we are hearing in Paul which sounds at first terribly egocentric "I'm here to make up for the incompleteness of Christ's suffering ." But better understood as suffering gladly as Christ did for the sake of his Church not in order to complete Christ's sufferings so much as to affirm them, to say that he too is following Christ in the way of suffering – to be glad then to serve others and not oneself. Perhaps a few words from Thomas Merton may help – from advice to a newly received Roman Catholic

*'I'm always glad to meet someone who has just come into the Church because they are full of grace and the grace overflows from the person who has just been received. And I have only one thing to say to you: the Church is a very big place. Always remember to go your own way in it.'* (p332 'We are already One' (Ed Henry and Montaldo 1974)

For grace, read joy and spontaneity.

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