Two men were working by the side of the road. One would dig a hole and then, as soon as he had finished, the other would fill it in again. They worked furiously all day without stopping, one man digging holes, the other filling them in. An onlooker was amazed at their hard work, but couldn’t understand what they were doing. So he asked the one who was digging the holes, “What’s going on? How come you dig a hole and then your partner follows behind and fills it in again.” The man wiped his brow and sighed, “Well, we’re normally a three-man team, but the guy who plants the trees is off sick today.”

Today we’re reflecting on the crucial difference between being busy and being productive with this story about Martha and Mary. We feel a considerable degree of sympathy for Martha, don’t we? We picture her, dressed in sensible clothes, protected by an enormous apron, hair tied up, a bit red in the face, slaving away over the proverbial hot stove.

Having Jesus to supper is great - except that wherever he goes he brings twelve hungry disciples with him! So there’s a lot to be done. And it’s Martha - good old hard-working, dependable Martha - who is doing it. And look - she’s the only one doing it! Mary (who I think of as floating around in chiffon and a sun-hat) is just sitting at the Lord’s feet listening to him.

What good is that when there’s work to be done! So Martha bustles in. With or without her rolling-pin - Luke doesn’t say. But she’s ready to give someone what for! The gracious smile with which she greeted her guests when they first arrived has evaporated in the heat of the kitchen. The ‘oh, don’t worry, it’s no trouble at all!’ has long since been forgotten. In she stomps...

Jesus stops speaking and looks up at her. Everyone else looks in her direction as well. ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’

Given what we know about Jesus, if we were coming to this incident for the first time, we would probably expect him to apologise for being the cause of difficulty and to send, if not Mary, then perhaps one or two of the less clumsy disciples to give her a hand.

But no. Jesus doesn’t do what we expect. He doesn’t simply deal with problems as we see them. Rather unnervingly, but of much greater benefit in the long run, he deals with them as he sees it. Like a skilful doctor, he doesn’t aim simply to treat the immediate symptoms of Martha’s distress. Instead, he addresses the underlying cause.

He is very sympathetic, isn’t he? Verse 41: ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...’ That’s exactly it. Things have got on top of her. She is out of balance. She has lost her sense of priorities. And so Jesus very gently puts her right. ‘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.’

We’d so love to know what happens next, wouldn’t we? But we don’t. Luke ends the story there and, as he does so, allows the spotlight to turn toward us. Where are we in this incident? What is Jesus saying to us?

With Martha, it’s clear that the real problem isn’t all the hard work she’s putting in. There’s nothing wrong with what she is doing. No, it’s what’s going on inside. It’s here that Martha provides us with some useful indicators to help us discern whether our own being busy indicates ‘balm’ or ‘barmy’.

First, there’s the way in which Martha is ‘worried and distracted by many things’. But, as Jesus tells her, ‘there is need of only one thing’. It’s worth asking ourselves the question - what are we inclined to be distracted by?
that Martha isn’t necessarily being distracted by anything wrong. Getting a meal ready for Jesus and his disciples is a really good thing to do. It’s just that she has lost her perspective. What has sometimes been called ‘the tyranny of the urgent’ has crowded out what is really important.

And so for us - what competes for pole position in our priorities? What for us is the ‘only one thing’ that is needed? It’s good to be busy for God. But sometimes, what’s even more important is just being quiet with God. The wrong sort of busyness damages our relationship with ourselves.

Secondly, her relationship with God is under strain. Any sentence that begins “Lord, do you not care...?” is a sure sign that something is wrong. How can we for whom Jesus gave up his life ever get into the state of thinking that he doesn’t care? The wrong sort of busyness distorts our perspective and damages our relationship with God.

And then thirdly, there’s her relationship with others in general and her sister in particular. Martha is sulky and petulant. “…my sister has left me to do all the work by myself... Tell her then to help me.” It’s not a good recipe for domestic harmony, is it? The wrong sort of busyness damages our relationships with one another.

Hard work has its place. But our lives also need to find room for the rhythm of quiet devotion, of listening to the Lord, of being fed by him, of being as well as doing. May our lives increasingly reflect the balance of all that God calls us to. For, actually, I’ve been told that Jesus quite likes beans on toast... Amen.