

## The One Thing Needful Moderator's Comments 15 June 2020

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

There are seasons in life when the light shines a little more brightly, and all looks rather clearer, even if all is not peace and tranquility. As Jesus came to the home of the sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany, Martha became distracted with the practical things of service. This led to her complaint to Jesus that she was left with the mundane tasks of life while Mary sat at Christ's feet and listened. Jesus' reply is a gentle rebuke, that Martha was troubled and anxious about many things, but Mary had realised – in the KJV's memorable expression – that 'one thing is needful', and it would not be taken from her (Luke 10:38-42). In the ESV translation it is 'one thing is necessary', which, of course, is accurate, but not so compelling to this ageing mind.

In 1765 the great evangelist, George Whitefield, stayed overnight in the home of a Thomas Fanning in New England. Fanning was apparently a man who possessed an abundance of the good things of life but not the 'one thing needful'. The next morning, Whitefield could not contain himself, and so he wrote with a diamond on a pane of glass 'one thing is needful'. Apparently the pane with its inscription survived for over sixty years, being commented on in 1828.

Whenever the four horsemen have been riding – pestilence, sword, famine, and death – they should lead finite creatures like us to ponder the shortness of our earthly stay. Threats of dislocation and death do not change the human condition; they merely run a highlighter through it. As Dr Johnson famously commented: 'Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.' At least it ought to.

Media-land would do anything to distract us, and have us

think in terms of a return to normality – to *Sunrise*; *Home and Away*; *Bride and Prejudice*; *The Drum*; *Four Corners*, and many other variations of banality, at best. Slogans abound, and serve as a substitute for thinking. Marxism has receded, but Cultural Marxism has taken its place, with 'victims' replacing the proletariat. The World Council of Churches in 1968 officially adopted a slogan which had been well-worn in liberal circles: 'The world sets the agenda.'

Christ tells us otherwise. When the sinful woman weeps at Jesus' feet, the Lord announces: 'Your sins are forgiven' (Luke 7:48). When Nicodemus comes to ask Jesus some questions, Jesus cuts him off with His statement that 'You must be born again' (John 3:3). Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he was determined to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor.2:2). When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, he carefully explained to his hearers that the man Jesus was in fact Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Then he went on to explain how through Christ, repentance, faith and baptism would mean that one's sins were forgiven (Acts 2:38).

Proportion plays a part in all this. When the Good Samaritan came across the beaten-up Jew, he saw that his immediate need was for physical help and comfort. It would have been inappropriate – even unchristian – to have simply placed a gospel tract in his pocket. John Wesley famously told his evangelists: 'You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work.' Such a sentiment did not prevent Wesley from becoming involved in the campaign against slavery. It has been said that it is braver to stamp on the corns of a live giant than to cut off the head of a dead one. We need to make sure

we are reflecting God's priorities, and not simply being media-driven. Not far off death, Paul exhorted Timothy: 'Preach the Word' (2 Tim.4:2). He was not reducing the Bible's message to three words, but he was saying that we need to centre on its message in the right proportion

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