

Fresh Perspectives

on Mary and Martha of Bethany

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne July 17th 2022 at St James and All Saints'

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 10.38 - 42

Surely you, as I have heard someone declare 'I'm a Martha', suggesting being occupied in busyness and activity, a 'doing person. Alternatively and less common someone declaring 'I'm a Mary', suggesting being a quiet contemplative 'being' person. May I suggest that this morning please leave such stereotypes aside as we consider Mary and Martha of Bethany, the subjects of today's gospel reading.

What do we know of these two women disciples of Jesus? Luke introduces them as being 'from a certain village'. John's gospel is more specific, 'from Bethany a town near Jerusalem'. We know also Jesus regularly called by on his way to or from Jerusalem. John records 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus (their brother). Jesus we know travelled in company of men and likely women disciples – he wouldn't have travelled alone – that wasn't safe. So there were likely more there than three or four persons.

1) Thus Luke records a visit – with significance for the host women in Bethany namely Mary and Martha. Jesus would then have been in the company of others, and they would surely have been in the visit. Hospitality was big in Jewish custom so it would be expected the women would have attended to their guests. Jesus has started to share with the others and Mary was attentive to his words of wisdom. Problems arise as there becomes too much for Martha to cope and angrily she speaks to Jesus, 'Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself? Tell her then to help me.'

Note the hostility – as Martha refers to Mary as 'my sister'. Luke does mention Martha was distracted by her many tasks', thus preparing the way for Jesus' response, and it is loving indeed – Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.' Can you just get the loving sentiment expressed toward Martha? Surely it calms the situation. Then comes another bidding, 'there is need of only one thing, Mary has chosen the better part.' That can be a difficult statement, in its seeming judgement, it would be preferable in the context to paraphrase, 'Mary has taken the opportunity' that is to listen to Jesus. Perhaps Jesus is aware of what he later tells the disciples, 'I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer.' (John 16) Thus in his 'non-anxious presence' Jesus ministers to Martha and affirms Mary.

That much we are familiar with in the story. Before moving on though it is noteworthy to be aware of Jesus' ministry recorded by Luke, with *gender balance*. Immediately preceding this meeting is the encounter of Jesus with the (male) lawyer who 'present and tries to test Jesus, asking the question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life? A random perusal of Scripture is that it looks on first sight to be male- dominated. A lesson from here is the need to look closely and note Jesus' ministry to St Paul's, 'in Christ there is 'no discrimination of gender, class or race.' (NZPB 478).

2) Subsequent to Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha there's a sequel, and it links with today's reading. Only it's found in another gospel – of John and in

a different context in account of the death of brother Lazarus. Some time has elapsed and one might wonder did Martha have regard for Jesus' insightful comment about 'being worried and distracted by many things, just one thing is needed'.

Listen to a brief summation in the Women's Bible Commentary: 'Martha and Mary, evidently well remembered in the early church, appear in quite a different light in John's gospel.'

Lazarus is sick and the sisters send a message to Jesus, 'Lord the one you love is ill.' Jesus is delayed in coming and Lazarus dies. Martha hears that Jesus is on his way and goes out to meet him. On meeting him she says, 'Lord, if you had been here he would not have died. 'NB ..But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus says of himself 'I am the resurrection and the life.....Do you believe this? Martha replies, *Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*' The Commentary notes: 'Martha makes the great Christological confession of this gospel.' Perhaps surprisingly it is not only Martha who says ..If only. Mary also goes out from in the house and John tells us when they met, Mary knelt and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. And Jesus comes alongside Mary, being 'greatly disturbed in spirit, and deeply moved' and weeps with her. Paul notes in his letter 'weep with those who weep...' thus sharing the grief.

Who would have thought though it would be Martha making the faith statement, after the unhappy episode of today's gospel? And all is well, and the sisters reconciled as some days before the Passover Jesus comes again to Bethany. Lazarus, now restored to life joins in the dinner. John notes: 'They gave a dinner for Jesus. Martha served and Mary anoints Jesus' feet.

In summary then what might we take from 'Fresh insights'.

- i) First, I would suggest taking opportunity of how we might *enhance belief in God and our faith in Jesus* – whether its 'being', or 'doing' or both. Thus not only prayer and reflection, it is also in good works for others. Mary took the opportunity that presented, and this is how it can be for us – in creation, in church, with loved ones, and our own being with Jesus.
- ii) *Dealing with distractions* – that's not easy'. Some of these I would for myself describe as 'wasting time'. Or having worries, its likely better to try to attend to these sooner rather than later. . Jesus did point Martha 'to another way.
- iii) Bringing to mind the teaching of St Paul, 'In everything with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 4.4 – 8)
- iv) Taking account of today's Collect prayer: us having a work to do, a life to live and joy in believing that will carry us through.