

Mary and Martha

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (OS 16C)

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Perhaps you can picture the scene:

Jesus arrives in Bethany with his entourage and turns up to the home of Mary and Martha with his 12 disciples and other hangers on. Jesus was by now recognised as an important teacher in Israel and what a privilege it was to have him in the home. Nothing but the best for this important visitor so Martha sets to work. So many to feed, so much to do, but at least she has Mary to help... She looks out and here is Mary, sitting at Jesus feet, hanging off his every word. Can't you just hear it? The pots are banging a little louder, the fridge door slammed a little harder, but still no response from Mary. Still sitting listening to Jesus...

Finally Martha explodes into the room where Jesus is, "Tell my sister she must help", She screams ... And the room goes silent.

Perhaps it is the story of Martha and Mary that is the hardest one to preach on, particularly as a young curate for invariable at the end of the service, one of the hard-working ladies of the church will come up to you and tell you that you have it all wrong. I remember, being 'told off' as a lay reader thirty-seven years ago when I tackled this Scripture, by a lady who as a hard worker in our parish said that if it wasn't for the Martha's of this world, nothing would get done. Perhaps there are some here that think this way. I am sure that if we thought about it a moment or two, that each of us could find a Martha or two in our congregations or Mothers Union branches.

So what is it? - Did Jesus or Luke have it in for women? or have no idea about what it takes to run a parish or a church or an organisation? Were they anti the workers?

I think not

This passage is all about relationship with God, Relationship with Jesus.

Martha was too busy to spend time with Jesus, although much of it was her own making. For Jesus a simple snack would do, but she wanted to impress -Cordon Bleu cooking - canapes, many courses - it be the works and Jesus would be impressed...

It is something I find when visiting - yes clergy still do that - but there is quite a difference between a visit in the sitting room with the best China, and a mug of coffee in the kitchen.

Martha got it wrong, because she was busy trying to impress Jesus with how good she was. And look at how it shows out in her words: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." She relates to Jesus as one in authority but seeks to use his authority for her own ends. She wants to tell Jesus to make others do what she wants. How often do we pray like this? We talk in terms of taking authority, but this is most often setting Jesus right about our agenda. We must learn to be Mary's in prayer, enjoying Jesus company, listening to him.

But it is not only in prayer that there is a problem, it relates to our whole relationship with God - was busy doing for Jesus - Jesus was the great teacher, but she was the great hostess. They were equals in their own way - each with their own expertise. Jesus could teach - sure, but could he feed a hungry horde?

Jesus owed her for what she did. Pure and simple, she earned what she would she receive. And so she had every right to tell Jesus what he must do!!!

Mary, is the picture of dependency. Listening to Jesus, sitting at his feet. She honoured him as teacher and recognised that he offered spiritual food that was the nourishment she needed. She recognised a hunger greater than a physical hunger and the means to satisfy it.

This flows right through to even how we view our church. Is it a place we go to do something or to be with God. Christian who come only when rostered on, come to do something and are in danger of missing the opportunity to engage Jesus.

I do not believe that Jesus was criticising Martha's helpfulness but her attitude. What we learn from these sisters is that Jesus respects and expects us to draw near to him and his presence. Brother Lawrence has written a book called 'Practicing the presence of God'. He essential states that in all that we do, we need the awareness of Jesus presence, and our dependence on him. It is this attitude that we must develop as we work for and with God.

Take a moment now - are you more Martha or Mary. Do you believe that God or the Church owes you something. Or have you taken your place at Jesus feet, to learn from him and grow into his likeness.

This day, let us be mindful in the busyness that in everything, Jesus wants us to be sitting at his feet and learning from him. Will you join me in this?

Let us together rejoice in being part of the worldwide church as well as accepting this responsibility to pray for the world

AMEN