

LUKE 10:38-42
ST JOHN'S; 21.7.19; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Well, the moral of this story is easy, isn't it? We all need to learn to be more like Mary, less like Martha. Busy is bad; reflection is good.

Maybe that's right, but let's stop and think about it a bit more! We know a bit more about Martha and Mary from John's gospel. The village they lived in was Bethany, which is only a few miles away from Jerusalem. They had a brother called Lazarus. John tells us the story of Lazarus dying, and Jesus coming and raising him back to life. It seems as if the three of them lived together, with no mention of being married. That would have been highly unusual in Jewish society in those days. It's possible, some would say probable, that Mary of Bethany was the same person as Mary Magdalene. (If you want to know more about that, I can lend you a book which explains the evidence).

CULTURAL NORMS

Michele Guinness writes about Martha in her book Woman: the Full Story. This is some of what she has to say:

Martha's education and intelligence are obvious when Jesus arrives at her home after her brother Lazarus has died. I love their relationship. It's wonderfully real and robust . . . there's no sense . . . that Jesus treated Martha any differently from a man. She is no fading violet in his presence. She is a strong and sensible woman who isn't afraid to give him a piece of her mind, and he loves her for it . . . Martha was so at ease with Jesus

that she thought nothing of drawing him into a family tiff. She genuinely expected him to tell her sister off for sitting around while she did all the work. And he knew Martha well enough to know that she could take his criticism on the chest like a man, when instead he affirmed Mary for giving him the gift of her attention. Martha probably went on muttering to herself in the kitchen. She had given him the gift of her cordon bleu cuisine, but then he was a man, after all – what did he know about the grind of the kitchen sink? And he would have shaken his head and laughed. It would take more than his gentle word of rebuke to flatten Martha.¹

When we read this story through our C21 Western culture, we fail to realise how radically Mary was behaving – and how radical Jesus was being in affirming her behaviour. We may be surprised to know that women in Jesus' time were educated. We may fail to realise that their duty was to run the home. In the scenario of this story, the expectation would have been that Lazarus sat at Jesus' feet, because sitting at the feet of the rabbi to learn was a man's prerogative. We can presume that at least some of the Twelve were there as well. Martha and Mary together would have been expected to provide hospitality, and especially the food. Hospitality was a huge priority; it was the height of bad manners not to welcome guests, and to do everything possible to make them comfortable, to provide for their every need. So Mary's behaviour is highly unconventional. She's taking on the man's role, by

sitting at Jesus' feet rather than helping to entertain and provide for the guest.

JUST ONE RIGHT THING

Jesus' reply to Martha's complaint is, *Martha, Martha! You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her* (vv 41-42). We all spend time on lots of things, we worry about so much. But there's one thing in life which should always have priority over everything else, and that's following Mary's example, and sitting at the Lord's feet listening to his word. In our terms that translates into prayer and Bible study, both on our own and alongside others in church, in prayer groups, in Bible Study or fellowship groups. As I've said, Mary was almost certainly not the only person in the room with Jesus that day.

It's very easy to lose sight of this one right thing. Martha wasn't an outsider. She was one of Jesus' disciples. Here she shows him her devotion, even if she hasn't chosen the right way to do it. When she meets Jesus after Lazarus has died, she shows herself to be spiritually highly perceptive, when she says to Jesus, firstly, *I know that [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection the last day*, and secondly, *I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world* (John 11:24,27). Martha would have loved to have joined Mary and the men in sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him, but she hadn't managed to break free of those cultural norms I've already mentioned, and maybe her character was to show her love and devotion through

action. There's not necessarily anything wrong with that. Jesus has just commended the Good Samaritan for his action in helping the traveller. A couple of chapters after this story, Jesus says, *Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?* (Luke 12:42). And in Mark's gospel, *whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all* (Mark 10:43-44). But, in the very limited time Jesus had to spend with Martha and her family on this occasion, he wanted their company and their attention rather than Martha's cordon bleu cookery and lavish hospitality.

CONCLUSION

I think it's amazing! Whoever we are, and whatever responsibilities we have, above everything else, Jesus simply wants us to spend time with him! To sit and chat, to listen to his teaching and learn from it! And that's what we all need to do, for our own spiritual health – spend time each day with our Lord, listening to what he has to say to us, learning more of his amazing love, and hearing how he wants us to serve him. So, if it isn't something you do already, make that change now. Find your Bible, go down to Manna bookshop on Charles St and get some daily notes to help you, and make it your number one priority to sit and spend time with your Lord and Saviour, each and every day. And make sure you're coming together with your church family week by week, to listen, learn and worship together. You'll delight God's heart, and find that your own spiritual health gets a real boost.

¹ Michele Guinness, Woman: The Full Story, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003), pp 113-114