

One thing is needed

Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:39-42

It is one of the sadnesses of the Christian tradition that there are very few churches dedicated to Martha, or St Martha as she might be called. She's often thought of as the patron saint of homemakers and innkeepers and people who are involved in hospitality. In the Scottish National Gallery there is a rather splendid portrait by Vermeer of Christ in the House of Martha and Mary. It shows Mary, sitting entranced at the feet of Jesus. It shows Martha, leaning over a table, holding a basket of bread. And she's not happy.

Hospitality is the fundamental trademark of Middle Eastern living. It matters that guests, friends, even strangers, are treated with welcome and inclusion. You share what you have, and you make people feel at home. That doesn't just happen; it takes work and preparation. And here was Mary, sitting with Jesus, not helping. We tend to read the story as Martha whining about Mary's laziness. We tend, if we're honest, to sympathise more with Martha than with Mary, and think Jesus is apparently a little too hard on Martha. There's more to this story than that.

We need to remember the context. Jesus had previously told the story of the Good Samaritan, maybe He was telling it again. One of the points of that story is that having faith without doing anything about it is an empty exercise. The story of Martha and Mary maintains that doing without listening is equally futile. Tying in this story with the parable of the Good Samaritan, is the Christian to be a hearer and a doer when it comes to faith? What do you think?

Martha, who had not doubt been banging pots and pans in a passive aggressive way in the background, couldn't take it any more. She goes to Jesus: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!" There were things needing done. Mary was only sitting and listening. She should be getting on with things.

Jesus' response is gentle: "Martha, Martha. You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing and it will not be taken away from her."

There are times in our lives when we need to re-evaluate our priorities and our motivation. I think that's one of the things that lay behind this domestic scene. It may be that many things are important and require our attention, but there are times when we need to focus on the things that are important first, before attending to everything else. Priorities change. Events overtake us. Too often we get stuck in our ways, our routines, and do not see the new things that God is doing around us, or we're frightened to abandon routine or the things to which we have grown accustomed.

In the home of Martha and Mary, which was also the home of Lazarus, Jesus found a safe house. And even if they did not fully know it then, there, in Bethany, the Saviour of the world was sitting and talking. The meal might wait, the one thing that was needed was to listen to Jesus, and then go and do something about it.

In our country and in our world priorities have changed at a bewildering pace in the last month. How do we set priorities? The effect of Brexit will be with our nation for a generation, and whatever side of the vote you were on, the impact will be severe and limiting. The ongoing turmoil in the Conservative and Labour parties, where things are far from settled, will effect our nation for a generation, and, in my view, leaves the future of the Union in question. The race-related shootings in the United States continue to scar that country and have been with that nation for generations and are not far beneath the surface of society, where prejudice and ignorance and fear run riot. The atrocious events in Nice on Thursday, on top of what happened in Paris last year, and Brussels, and Baghdad, and Istanbul, and Medina, reveal a streak of cruelty that runs deep in individuals, and finds its root in disaffected people who have perverted their religion into a killing creed. If your religion requires you to hate someone, or to kill someone, you need a new religion.

What should be the priorities of the world today? What should be the priorities of the people in power in different walks of life? What should be the priorities of people like us, who by our words, thoughts and actions have an effect on the people around us – our friends, families, colleagues and fellow worshippers?

In amidst our busy-ness, our worries and our troubles, which are real, and need addressing, it may well be that at this time of turmoil, one thing is necessary. One focus. One attention holder. To sit for a moment at the feet of our Saviour and to listen. To take to heart what He has to say about love and kindness, about gentleness and hopefulness, about service and humility. And then, having listened, having taken it to heart, rise from our seats, and do something about it.

There's no point in being Martha, if you haven't first listened like Mary. There's no point in being Mary if you don't work like Martha. We listen to the love; we then live the love.

I like to think they got there in the house of Martha and Mary. I like to think that Martha calmed down, and listened to Jesus and His teaching; and Mary got up, and helped Martha with the domestic chores. I like to think that because it shows the balance of how to be a Christian: listening and acting; witnessing and thinking.

The story of Martha and Mary is about the daily comings and goings in a home. It is about the ordinariness of life. Something about this domestic experience must have been important to the early church for Luke to include it in his Gospel. It is about the surprise that some people make their priority, at a certain point, to pay close attention to Jesus. It is about the reality that so many of us are so distracted by our doing that we miss hearing God's word. Is there so much distraction in our contemporary lives that people find it impossible to sit and listen for the Holy Spirit to speak?ⁱ

There are times in our personal lives, and in the life of our world, when the need is not productivity and being busy, it is to reflect and listen. In these anxious times there is a need to rebalance. It begins with us. In these anxious times, there will be time soon enough to get work done. But first we need to listen to Jesus.

"In the end, Luke's story is not about paying attention to the moment, nor is it about the just division of household chores. It is about paying attention to God's Word."ⁱⁱ For Jesus, Martha is not a problem. She is someone whom Jesus loved very much. Jesus is giving Martha a chance to notice that the world spins just fine, even without her sister, or both of them together, pushing it.

There is a challenge to get that balance right: in our home lives; in our work lives; in our Church lives. There is also a challenge when we apply the listening/doing model to the way our world is. It is not an either/or; it is a both/and. What if, instead of polarising, we brought together? What if instead of demonising, we looked for the image of God in the ones we disagree with? What if, instead of shouting our opinions and determining to get our own way, we looked, we listened, we paused? Might that not be, just possibly, the way Jesus wants us to be?

“We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Be Martha; be Mary. But above all else, be Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Mary Miller Brueggemann, Luke: Feasting on the Gospels, p306

ⁱⁱ ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeleine L'Engle