

Martha and Mary...

... beware of distractions

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Trinity, 17th July 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 10:38-end

Over the years, quite a number of people have confessed to me that the gospel reading we've just had is their least favourite passage. And I guess that because many of us are busy people, we instinctively side with Martha, the one who is conscious of all the things that have to be done - generous, hospitable, activist Martha, who rolls up her sleeves and gets things done. And if we're honest we would rather admire her than that simpering Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet and conning him into giving her all the approval when she's sitting there doing nothing. I'm caricaturing it, of course, but that's what it can feel like as though Jesus is treating Martha unfairly and, by implication, all of us who might identify with Martha in her desire to keep the household functioning and get the necessary jobs done. Does Jesus not realise that if you don't work, you don't eat?

Well, I think there's a danger in this story of making too strong a contrast between the practical Martha and the spiritual Mary. According to Jesus, and indeed, according to Luke in the narrative, Martha's problem is not that she is getting jobs done, but that she is distracted. Her mind is on too many things at once and I suspect we all of us find that easy to identify with. Our world today provides more distractions than ever before. You could say that distractedness is the supreme quality of our culture, because there are so many things competing for our attention, so much information bombarding us, so many demands being made out of our limited time: work; shopping; social media; TV campaigns; clubs; organisations; - all coming to us seeking our attention.

So Martha's problem is not that she's getting an important job done, but that she's distracted. She's worried about this important guest who suddenly turned up, possibly with twelve friends (the passage doesn't say, but when Jesus travelled, it tended to be in company), so she's worried about the hospitality, maybe worried about what he'll think - he's turned up unannounced, she hasn't had a chance to Hoover, the newspapers are still out on the coffee table and she's worried about all

those things that have to be dealt with in order to make a good impression. But the reason Jesus has come to see her is because he wants to get to know her. And it says she welcomed him. She presumably wanted to spend time with him and get to know him better. And then she shoots herself in her own foot by then running off and finding lots of jobs to do instead of just getting to know Jesus and giving him her attention.

And again, I suspect we all recognise that: we want to welcome Jesus; we know how attractive a figure he is; if only we could get below the surface in our prayers; if only we could make a real connection with him. But so often, when we find we have an opportunity to be still, to be attentive, to do some deep listening - how easy it is to blow it and to allow our minds to wander off and be distracted and for us to start making mental lists of all the things that have to be done. Or else we just fritter our time, both on the one hand wanting to spend time with Jesus, but on the other hand finding excuses not to settle down to it and frittering our time with other things.

And according to Jesus, Mary has chosen the better way. But the better way does not necessarily mean passive spiritual contemplation. Mary's activity in this story is, when you look at it closely, more provocative than you might think. In the first place, she had strayed out from the private quarters of the house, the domestic 'back of house', in order to come into the front room, a public room where guests were received, but where women would not normally venture and certainly wouldn't be expected to talk unaccompanied with male guests. So Mary is crossing a social barrier by coming and sitting at Jesus's feet. And the description of her sitting at Jesus's feet doesn't mean she was gazing up at him like some kind of poodle. She was doing what St Paul was doing when he sat at the feet of his teacher, Gamaliel. And when Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, she is quietly and subversively adopting the attitude of a pupil under instruction to become a rabbi or a teacher like Jesus. It seems Mary also wishes to announce that God's kingdom is near, just like those 70 disciples who were sent out at the beginning of the chapter. And so her crime in Martha's eyes, is not so much that she's not helping to peel the spuds, it's that she's got ideas above her station. She's behaving like a man: 'Fancy, imagining that she could be a teacher like Jesus, or a disciple like one of the 70.' But Jesus affirms her right to embrace a bigger calling than the one her culture would normally allow. Mary is showing signs of wanting to be an apostle, and Jesus seems perfectly happy to encourage her.

So we might reflect on whether we've ever been guilty, perhaps like Martha, not just of being distracted ourselves, but of trying to pigeon-hole others, of failing to recognise somebody else's potential and of thinking to ourselves, 'Oh, she could never do that. Or who does she think she is?' Or even of failing to accept someone else as an equal, 'We don't want their kind here, they don't belong.' And we might also reflect on whether we could be more like Mary. Might Jesus be calling you to outgrow your previous role? Or to believe and have the confidence that you could be more than you currently think you are. Maybe other people have put you in a box and told you what you can and can't do, and you've been in danger of accepting the labels and the limitations that other people have imposed upon you.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus is likely to take you on a journey because in the sense that I'm suggesting, it expresses a desire to become more like Him, to grow in fearlessness and to grow in love.

The opposite of being distracted is being focused. And that, I think, is what is being commended in Mary's behaviour, and that is what Jesus is gently critiquing in Martha's behaviour. Perhaps we could reflect on the ways in which we allow ourselves to be more distracted than we need to be. Maybe we could pray for the Holy Spirit to give us that focus: that more single-minded determination to hear the word of God; to hear his calling in our lives; to discern his will for us, in order that we might overcome the obstacles other people place in our way. And that we might grow into the full flourishing of being a child of God that the Lord intends for us.

Mary may be an unlikely revolutionary, but she offers us insight into how being a disciple requires us to grow in sometimes unexpected or even radical ways. May you be open to such growth. May you be able to set aside the distractions and hear the Lord's voice more clearly. And may you, like Mary, hear the Lord commend you for your focus and for choosing the better part.

Reading Text

Luke 10:38-end

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'