**Mary and Martha**

We’ve probably all heard sermons on Mary and Martha. Many of which simply say that Martha was too busy to notice Jesus and Mary was wonderful sitting at his feet.

The problem with this is that those of us who are Marthas feel annoyed, and those who are more like Mary can resolve never to be a Martha and possibly never do anything because they are too busy praying!

Marthas, of course, are the Duracell bunnies of the church. They keep going and going and going. Because of Marthas, the church budget gets balanced, things get fixed and organized, jobs get done... You don’t appreciate Marthas until a Martha is missing and then all the Marys are scrambling around looking for the keys and how to set the thermostats.

What’s very interesting is that Luke placed the story we had today after that of the Good Samaritan. You’ll remember in that story the Priest—seen as the most holy and prayerful—is one of the ones who walks by, and the parable is designed to point out that we can be too holy…

Taken together, we have a little more balance.

Luke has chosen stories and parables to answer this question: What is discipleship?

The parable of the Good Samaritan emphasized serving our neighbour. The Mary and Martha story at first glance reminds us to listen and look to Jesus.

The two aren’t mutually exclusive. They are the two fundamental parts of Jesus’ teaching: love God and love your neighbour.

So, the story of Mary and Martha. This particular occasion is probably one of many where the women have been preparing dinner. It must have been pretty stressful every time Jesus turned up—especially because there was probably a larger family around, and Jesus went *everywhere* with other people. It’s unlikely they were just cooking for four!

Naturally, Martha expected her sister Mary to lend a hand with the preparations, but Mary is sitting with the men and listening to Jesus tell stories that speak about God. Now this would have been hugely controversial. To sit at the feet of a Rabbi meant that you were a disciple of that Rabbi.

And people had said about Jesus…He speaks with authority like no other Rabbi we know. Mary is amongst the men.

In 1st century Judaism, women did not sit with men. In the synagogue, men were on the ground floor, women on the second—and this still happens in Orthodox Synagogues today.

*[Story of Synagogue in Brighton: Minyan- 10 men over 13.]*

So men and women don’t mix when a Rabbi is teaching. Mary should not be there.

As the day wore on… Martha couldn’t manage. She was not done, and she was probably worried about what would happen when the food wasn’t ready and these men get up.

She says, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

She *may* also be thinking… “This is disgraceful. What will happen to us? My sister has joined a band of men. What will the neighbours think? After this, who will marry my sister? Why aren’t these men telling her to move off the floor? What is Jesus thinking, allowing her to sit there and not suggesting she goes back into the kitchen? She’s moved out of her place. This is sooo embarrassing.”

This would explain Jesus’ response: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed…” Perhaps he’s saying, “Martha, one more plate of food is not that important. One more person who hears my words and implements them is more important than a good meal.”

Jesus is defending Mary’s right to become a disciple and continue her theological studies at His feet. This traditional Jewish separation of men and women is no longer necessary. For women and other oppressed people, Jesus turned upside down the accepted wisdom of the day.

You see, Pharisees believed that touching an unclean person polluted the one who touched. When Jesus touched a person with leprosy, Jesus did not become dirty—the one with leprosy became clean.

When a supposedly sinful woman washed the feet of Jesus. Jesus didn’t become implicated in her sin, rather she went away from Jesus forgiven and transformed.

When Jesus defied custom and entered the house of the pagan, nothing bad happened to him, but the pagan’s servant was healed.

By going out of his way to meet with the Samaritan woman at the well, and eat with sinners like Zacchaeus, and touching the sick, Jesus extended the offer of God’s mercy to women like Mary and to all people regardless of who they were.

Instead of the message: “NO undesirables allowed,” Jesus proclaimed: “In God’s kingdom, there are no undesirables.” This is why we talk about inclusion in our churches. Anyone can come and sit at Jesus’ feet.

So, it isn’t fair to malign Martha the way people often do—she had a valid point that what was happening was completely counter cultural. We should also note that Jesus didn’t say Martha was wrong in playing the good hostess. She was doing a job that needed to be done. Jesus, with His gentle refusal, made it perfectly plain that while all of us have important things that need to be done, for the kingdom of God to grow and expand, there is only one thing absolutely needful: faith in Him.

Mary and Martha clearly have different personalities and ways of doing things. But they both loved Jesus.

Christianity is a religion based on a person, not rules or regulations. Christians derive their identity not from principles or even “values” but from a relationship with Jesus. It is not true that people who have Christian values are necessarily Christians.

A Christian is someone whose home is always open to Jesus, and that home is our hearts.

Martha is so busy serving, on this occasion, she completely forgets whom she truly serves. Martha is distracted *from* the teachings of Jesus by her cooking. **But** note Martha never let Jesus pass by her home without inviting him in for a meal.

There’s a lot of things for us to learn here. Are we too busy serving that we forget who we serve, and perhaps sometimes in the doing find ourselves distracted from the call to feed the poor, tend to the sick and make disciples? Not just do the things we do and have always done.

Do we, daily perhaps, invite Jesus into the homes of our hearts?

Do we worry about what others might think, if we talk about being with Jesus, because even today, that is countercultural…

As the men and women sat with Jesus, he spoke about amazing things—his teaching was captivating, his words were life and light—and we still have that today. As we put this story with the Good Samaritan. We need a relationship with Jesus and we need to be doing good works. It is not enough to have either or. You cannot be a Christian by just doing good things, and you cannot live a Christian life by coming to church and praying and not putting yourself out in order to serve others.

We need to be like Martha and offer him hospitality: to give him our best, to invite him into our hearts, to speak plainly to him about what’s going on in our lives, to let him gently point out when we’re getting it wrong. Martha is the one who always speaks honestly to Jesus. He is clearly her friend and brother as well as teacher.

So, can you invite Jesus into the home of your heart? Can you speak plainly to him? Can you listen to the words he gives you? Be like Martha.

Be like Mary. We need not to worry about the conventions of our day or what the church has always done. We need to break stereotypes which stop people from hearing the good news. We need to speak out and make it clear that all people are welcome to sit at Jesus’ feet.

What distracts you from listening to the words of Jesus? How can you take time to hear his call and priorities.

Praying does not make us pious; it makes us practical.

Be like Mary. Be like Martha. Love God and love your neighbour.