

Jesus at Martha and Mary's Luke 10.38-42

So, Jesus and his disciples arrive in "a certain village", which we learn from John 11.1 is Bethany, just a stone's throw away from Jerusalem.

And Martha, presumably big sister to Mary and Lazarus as she takes the lead, welcomes Jesus into her home.

Jesus was obviously a good friend to this family, for in John 11.3 Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus saying "Lord, he whom you *love* is ill."

Nonetheless, Jesus is an important visitor, and Martha immediately sets about preparing a meal.

Mary sits listening at Jesus' feet.

Until that is, all this hard work gets too much for Martha and she explodes at Jesus, "do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me!"

You can hear the love that Jesus has for Martha in his response: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things"

You can see Jesus just wanting to take Martha up in his arms and give her a big hug and tell her it's all alright.

"There is need of only one thing" Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Now, there are many conclusions we could draw from this passage; some much better than others.

One conclusion you might hear is that this passage shows us that time spent with Jesus is more important than time doing things for Jesus.

This conclusion of course appeals to contemplative people.

And makes activists feel guilty or second rate!

But whilst this passage might well prompt us to think about the time we spend with Jesus, listening to him through his Word and prayer, it surely doesn't elevate contemplation above activity.

In the same chapter as this episode, Luke 10.1, Jesus had sent the 70 out on a mission to heal and preach.

And Jesus offers his mild rebuke to Martha not for her activity, but for her worry and distraction.

No, spending time in the quiet place with Jesus is important, vitally important, but this should not preclude action in his service.

A better conclusion I've heard drawn from this passage is that it shows the value Jesus placed upon women.

In Jewish society, it might well have been expected that the women would be about the work of preparing food, whilst sitting and listening to a rabbi speak was the privilege of the men.

And certainly it is true that in this house in Bethany, Jesus grants Mary a place with the men, and refuses to take it away from her when challenged.

There can be little doubt that in a society that treated woman as second class citizens, if citizens at all, Jesus gave them dignity and offered them a place in his mission.

But whilst this conclusion is true, surely we get at the heart of this passage through the repetition of Martha's being, "*distracted* by many tasks/things".

For surely the "one thing" that is needed (vs42) is to be *attentive* to Jesus.

This Mary managed by sitting at Jesus' feet.

And this Martha failed to do due to her worries and distractions.

Mary it seems had caught the mood of Jesus.

Jesus is in the last 6 months of his life; a life that is moving inexorably towards his passion and crucifixion.

What he wants is not for his friends to be running around putting on an elaborate spread, but sitting with him; giving him time to talk with them; to share his heart with them.

We can't doubt from this passage that Martha loved Jesus just as much as Mary.

But Martha makes the mistake of thinking that out of her love for Jesus, she must work hard to prepare a super meal for him.

At another time, this might have been just what he was after.

But not now!

And Martha never thought to ask.

So, what might it mean to deliberately put distractions aside, be attentive to Jesus and then act upon his word?

Firstly, perhaps it means a change of attitude, so that we no longer like Martha assume that we know what Jesus wants, and expect everyone else to join with us in doing it, and get cross if they don't!

But rather to adopt an attitude that says to Jesus, "what do you want?"

I remember someone coming into church once with an item from their house. "I no longer need this, vicar, so I thought I'd put it in Church."

In a very simple way, they were being kind.

But I hoped that as they grew in Christian maturity they would come to ask the question, "What does the Church need to do the work God is calling us to?" rather than to simply say "this is what I want to do/give and the church/Jesus should be grateful."

Secondly, perhaps it means developing an attitude of expectation that God will speak, and training ourselves to listen.

Even as a rector, I know it possible to go through a whole day, even a day where you're about God's business, without even giving God a thought; without ever stopping to ask the question, "Jesus what do you want? What do you think?"

For those of you working in high pressure jobs, caring for family, I'm sure it can be even harder.

But Jesus said, "I know my sheep and they know my voice."

Through building times into our day when we can be quiet before God, when we can read the bible and pray,

through practicing connecting with him on the tube, at our desk, during a difficult meeting, as we wash the dishes or change a nappy,

we can begin to learn what his voice sounds like and become more in tune with, and attentive to him.

Thirdly, perhaps it means resisting the temptation to be a 'busy' church.

By that I don't mean a church that does nothing; far from it.

But it is all too easy for a church to pack its hour on a Sunday so full of stuff that it does that it doesn't have time for listening to Jesus.

It's possible to pack meeting agendas so full that there is no time for reflection, prayer and listening to what God might want.

It is possible to be so concerned about reaching the lost, bringing people into Church, offering excellent creative worship, meeting all the needs of everyone, that there is no time to do anything well and to lose touch with the God it was all for in the first place.

As an activist, and someone who can have a million good ideas before breakfast, I often find myself praying, "God, please save me from my own good ideas and show me your God ideas."

Please don't misunderstand me.

I'm not saying that we can't use our own creative gifts and talents in God's service.

I'm not saying that you can't decide whether to put on green or blue socks in the morning without a clear word from the Lord.

But what I am saying is,

If Jesus is the most important person in our lives,

If Jesus is our heart's desire; the one we long for and thirst for,

Let's make sure, one way or another, that we don't get so worried or distracted by things, that we fail to listen to what he has to say, or indeed to join in doing what he is doing.