

ST MARY'S IFFLEY

Proper 11 Year C Principal Service

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Amen to women bishops!

The story of Mary and Martha is one that communicates with us very quickly owing, I think, to its simple and clear characterisation. It seems an uncomplicated story, made all the easier by appearing to be something of a family squabble between two sisters; and those of us familiar with family life will be familiar with squabbles between siblings!

Between my brother and I it was often over the drying up – with my brother always having something vital to do at just that moment – leaving me, drying up cloth in hand, to tackle the drying up alone. And perhaps there was something of a history with Mary too of her not pulling her weight with the housework? Perhaps....

So the ingredients in the story seem familiar and the message straightforward:

*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted
by many things; there is need of only one thing.
Mary has chosen the better part,
which will not be taken away from her*

are the words of Jesus which conclude the story.

Many women identify most readily with Martha and feel put down by the way she is treated but while this seems a very understandable response, nevertheless the whole point of the story is that it does not so much 'put down' Martha as it honours Mary.

But just what is the "better part" that Mary has chosen?

The story only tells us two things about Mary – she sits at the Lord's feet and she listens to what he is saying.

"Sitting at the Lord's feet" – Saint Paul later on in the Acts of the Apostles speaks about himself as a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in Jerusalem 'at the feet of Gamaliel'. When the Gerasene demoniac is healed by Jesus, the people come and see the man, 'sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind'. Today we still talk of "sitting at someone's feet". Mary's posture is a way of portraying her as a disciple – she sits at the Lord's feet.

And she "listens to what he is saying" – just a bit earlier on in Luke's Gospel, the transfiguration has occurred. The three disciples Peter, James

and John have gone up the mountain with Jesus to pray. When there they see Jesus transfigured and hear a voice from heaven which says:

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Attentive listening is the ‘better part’ that Mary has chosen – and by doing so she has opted to be a disciple.

The whole context too makes it quite clear that the focus of this story is on Mary being a disciple of Jesus. The part of Luke’s Gospel where this story can be found, and it is only Luke who tells this story, is all about what it means to be a disciple.

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 9. The teaching that has then followed has been about discipleship and we’ve been following it over the last few weeks here at church.

The urgency of the call:

*No one who puts a hand to the plough and turns back
is fit for the Kingdom of God.*

The vulnerability of those sent:

*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals;
and greet no one on the road.*

The priority of helping and being helped in last week’s parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now, astonishingly, a woman makes clear the heart of what it means to be a disciple – sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to what he is saying. Mary has not accepted the stereo typical role for a woman which was, and still often is, doing the household tasks. Instead she has chosen to be a disciple. The contrast in the story with Martha is not so much to put Martha down as to honour Mary.

One further point to strengthen you if, when you hear this story, you have a tendency to identify with Martha and feel miffed by the way she is treated!

Mary and Martha appear together with their brother Lazarus in John’s Gospel. Bethany is their village and Jesus comes to them because his friend Lazarus has died. Martha comes out to meet Jesus while Mary stays at home. When Martha and Jesus meet they have a profound theological discussion in which Jesus says those momentous words:

I am the resurrection and the life,

at the end of which Jesus asks Martha:

Do you believe this?

And Martha says to him:

*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,
the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*

This confession of faith ranks in significance and depth alongside Peter's at the transfiguration and Thomas' at the resurrection; and it's Martha who makes it.

If it's Martha you identify with in the story of Mary and Martha, then identify with Martha in the story of the raising of Lazarus – and rejoice to be Martha!

So Luke offers us this story of Mary and Martha not to put down Martha but to show us what the heart of being a disciple is – which is to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to him. The revolutionary part of the story is in having a woman, Mary, be the example to us of this – Martha is being invited to follow her sister and step out of her socially accepted role and too become one of Jesus' disciples.

Finally some of you may be worried then as to who and how all the jobs are going to get done if we all become Marys! Of course this story does not address that issue – that's not the point at all, but it is a response that rises in our minds – who's going to do the housework?

There's a delightful midrash from an ecumenical women's group in Denmark which takes this question and uses it to bring out the way this story has that sharp revolutionary edge in having a woman show us what it means to be a disciple. A midrash is a Jewish way of exploring the meaning of a story by elaborating it, or continuing it in some way.

So here's the midrash.

"Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus 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.'

But the Lord answered her, 'Mary is listening to my message about freedom, and she has understood it as literally as it has to be understood. Therefore she remains sitting. Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things, because your world expects it from you as a woman, but I am not of this world. I bring freedom to the oppressed. Mary has received that freedom, do come and receive it too.'

And Martha tore her clothes and fell down at his feet and cried: "Lord, who is going to take care of the children and do the work?"

But Jesus answered: "Let the children remain among us. Later on we will do the work together. You forget that those men who have understood the outreach of my gospel have also understood that freedom at the cost of women is not Christian freedom.""

Amen to women bishops!