

**Introduction**

This is one of those Gospel stories that I am a bit ambivalent about. I don't quite know what to make of it.

I love it because it gives an intimate insight into Jesus' life and friendships.

Martha and Mary appear in this chapter of Luke's Gospel and in two chapters of John. They appear as the most rounded characters in the Gospels apart from Jesus's closest disciples. We know quite a lot about Martha and Mary. We know that they were sisters and that they and their brother Lazarus were friends of Jesus. When Lazarus was ill they sent a message to Jesus saying, 'Lord, the one you love is ill'. Jesus visited their home on more than one occasion and they were on easy terms with him. Martha felt able to speak frankly with Jesus here in this story but also when he arrived after Lazarus had died. She said to him, 'Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died' and again at the tomb when Jesus told the people to roll the stone away, in her practical forthright way she said, 'Lor, don't. It has been four days there will be a smell!' She was clearly on easy, familiar terms with Jesus.

But I find I have a problem with this story because I see myself in it. When you look at this story do you see yourself in it? Who would you be?

**Martha**

Welcoming, hospitable, generous, practical, thorough, task focused, distracted

**Mary**

Absorbed, worshipping, listening, hearing, learning, focused, undistracted

*Cartoon ears picture*

This is like a cartoon picture of Mary because what she liked to do was to sit and listen to Jesus and she could listen to him for hours. She probably liked listening to all sorts of people, and

Colossians 1: 15-28

Luke 10:38- 42

may have been the sort of person people could talk to easily because they could see she was interested in them. Mary's idea of cooking a meal was probably beans on toast, and she probably didn't notice the dust creeping up until she could write in it.

### *Cartoon hands picture*

This is like a cartoon picture of Martha, because what she liked best was doing things for people and making sure they had clean shirts and well balanced meals. Her idea of cooking a meal would be roast chicken with all the trimmings. If you wanted something done you'd ask Martha.

Now people sometimes get upset by this reading because they think Jesus is saying that everyone ought to spend their time listening like Mary, and that busy, practical people like Martha aren't somehow as good. But of course Jesus isn't saying that at all. His own life was full of work and activity, travelling, preaching, teaching and healing and none of that would have been done if he hadn't been a doer.

But he also spent hours late at night, or early in the morning on his own with God, talking things over and quietly listening. And he knew that this was a really important part of the doing. He knew we need to keep the right balance between input (the ears) and output (the hands). On that particular visit to Mary and Martha's house the listening was more important than the doing.

When we think of Mary it is easy to think of her as a bit of a pious Goody Goody: someone who wanted to learn and who left the work to others because she wasn't interested in it or even that it was beneath her. In the culture she lived in it was the women who did the work and the men who talked and listened and learned. Some people think that Mary is a bit above herself because she is behaving like one of Jesus' close disciples. She is breaking boundaries. It was unheard of, in Jewish culture, for a woman to sit in the public room with the men and take part in the debate and teaching. Mary is

Colossians 1: 15-28

Luke 10:38- 42

behaving like a man – and more than that she is sitting at the feet of the teacher, as someone who themselves wants to teach would.

So what about Martha? Jesus' words to her sound like a rebuke; <sup>41</sup> 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup> but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'"

I am tempted to think, being a woman, "What would have happened if Martha had sat down too and no meal had appeared on the table? Would Jesus have still responded the same way?". Well yes of course he would. He was able to provide miraculously for the needs of 5,000 people. He knew that food is important and that we all have our physical needs. He knew that hospitality was important and that people need to be welcomed and cared for but I believe he is saying it isn't an either or. It isn't one or the other – it is both but if we attend to the one the other will come more naturally. On that particular visit to Mary and Martha's house the listening was more important than the doing. What we all need to do is notice when we need to listen, and be ready to stop what we're doing and listen.

So what does this story teach us?

This story is often being interpreted as being a clash between those who listen and those who do. I don't believe, that at its heart, it is. Martha wasn't only upset because she was having to bear the brunt of the hospitality alone. She was upset because Mary was breaking the accepted norms. In her desire to be near Jesus, to hear him teaching and to understand she was behaving in a shocking way. Mary's thirst for a relationship with Jesus and need to learn what he had to teach her made her break all the accepted boundaries of the day.

I believe, in looking at the traditional understanding of this incident, that Mary's desire to listen was the most important

thing. We do need to be still. To stop fussing, to focus and not be distracted by the things of life in order to hear God speaking to us, in order to grow in faith and in order to be able to share that faith with others.

But if Mary simply stayed at Jesus's feet, if she didn't put what she learned into practice, if she didn't allow Jesus' teaching to transform her and to change her she would simply be wasting her time. And if her listening didn't result eventually in loving service then that would be a waste of time as well.

Martha was not wrong to want to serve, to deal with the needs of her guests, but she was restricted by the norms of the day that said it was not a woman's place to learn, women should keep their place, women should not be committing their lives to faith and discipleship. Jesus too broke the accepted norms. He welcomed women as disciples, he allowed them as part of his circle of followers and it was to the women that he announced his resurrection first.

What this story teaches us is that relationship with Jesus is the most important thing. That it is something that crosses all boundaries and is open to all. It is something that should not be restricted by convention, by the fear that we might not be good enough, the feeling that other people are more important in Jesus' eyes than we are. It should not be restricted by gender, class or education. What Jesus shows in this story is that every single person is important to him; that he wants a relationship with each of us and that he desires our attention and our time. He is not telling us that we shouldn't serve others but what he is saying is that first of all and above all else we should seek and serve him. And that privileged relationship of Jesus' close circle of disciples is open to every one of us.