

When I wrote this sermon on Thursday I was struggling to find a way of starting it. I had studied the passages that would be read this morning and decided to speak on the gospel reading, I had read the commentaries, I had listened to some other people's views on that reading, and I knew the point I wanted to make – but I didn't know how to start it off. Then I realised the gospel reading was about two sisters who also had a brother – and I am a brother who has two sisters, so could I use that as a way in?

You see, I am the baby of our family – and when I was growing up my sisters were, shall we say, fairly keen on making sure that I knew that. But they were to some extent then, and most definitely are today, very different in so many ways. My big sister Liz lives in Glasgow with her husband Dave. She is a retired teacher who loves to lunch with her friends. And she seems to have friends that she will go and stay with wherever they travel to – or perhaps that is why they travel to those places. My little sister (who is of course older than me but you know what I mean) is a retired nurse / care home manager / trainee solicitor / trainee optician I seem to remember for a while, who loves to be surrounded by her grandchildren whenever possible. And she seems to fill a lot of her days by going for walks with friends. Liz is a Scottish Anglican, Rosie a Catholic.

But none of this gets close to describing why they are so different – but they just are.

One of the difficulties we have with our gospel reading this morning is the difficulty we have with understanding many of the stories in the gospels. You see when the gospels were written they were all written out by hand onto parchment and so had to be as succinct as possible – which means there is very little detail in there, and so we have to try and fill in the gaps ourselves. So let's have a go at doing that, so that perhaps we can see just how different Martha and Mary really were.

Luke was a great story teller, and so these little interludes between swathes of Jesus' teaching, are really important. And every story that is included must be there for a reason, so as well as filling in the gaps, we also need to find out why the story is there at all.

The first thing to note, then is we are told at the beginning, "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village. Jesus appears to be on his own – the disciples have either gone off without him for a bit, or perhaps Luke didn't consider it mattered to the story whether they were there or not so excluded them. The certain village is where Mary and Martha lived (with their brother Lazarus who doesn't actually get a mention so he clearly wasn't important here either), and whilst Luke doesn't tell us where it is, John tells us they lived in Bethany. Now Bethany was just outside Jerusalem which shows us something else. Much of Luke's gospel is a narrative of Jesus' physical journey to the cross, and in chapter 10 we are very early in that journey – but Bethany, being just outside Jerusalem, is towards the end of that journey, so Luke must be taking this story out of the correct order – suggesting that it was important that the message contained in the story was relayed to his readers early on.

The rest of that first verse is also interesting, "where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home". It was Martha's house – a woman owning a house in those days was not common. It was Martha's house so Mary either lived in Martha's house or she was visiting. It

was Martha's house so she was doing the hospitality. Hospitality in those days was more than important – it was essential – it is just what people did, especially when, as an apparently quite prosperous lady, she would have owned a reasonably sized house.

And then we come to the issue. “She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.” A number of things comes out of this sentence. Sitting at the Rabbi's feet is how the pupil would generally be taught, so this is what Mary is expecting – and as far as we know, was getting. But women were not allowed to be taught by a Rabbi in this way – they were generally taught by their husbands or by other women. But as Jesus is prepared to teach her, we can assume that Jesus is seeing her as, if not a current, a future disciple. A woman disciple. Revolutionary!

But Martha was not happy with this – she wanted Mary to help her in the kitchen. “Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” And here we have two sisters. It is difficult for us to describe why they are different. They just are! One wants to be a disciple and sit at Jesus' feet. The other wants to be practical and get on with the work – and thinks her sister should be doing the same.

So who is right? Some people's reaction to this story is to ask people are you a Martha or a Mary? That really isn't helpful. The point is people don't have to be one or the other – you can be both. But on this occasion Jesus is clearly worried by Martha's attitude – and actually that attitude is all centred around the word “me”. “Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Jesus is a great believer in hospitality. He engaged people many times over meals, but the nature of the hospitality that he is talking about centres on attending to one's guests, but Martha's speech is centred on her own needs, not the guests.

But even that is not the end of the issue. This story comes immediately after the story that some of you may have heard me talk about last week – the parable of the Good Samaritan. What we concluded then was that it is important that you not only love God with all your heart, soul strength and mind but you love your neighbour as yourself, and that means including everyone as your neighbour. And the way that Jesus demonstrated how to do that was in the parable of the Good Samaritan where the actions taken by the Samaritan were key to the whole message, not just knowing the law. So for Mary to just sit and listen and learn, cannot be enough or we have part of Luke's gospel contradicting that part that was just before it.

There is one other thing in this reading, which might seem quite minor at first, which actually helps us in our understanding of what is going on. Did you know that Luke is the only gospel writer that refers to Jesus as Lord. What is more, in these 5 verses he uses the word Lord 3 times.

The word Lord is not simply one of respect (a replacement could be Sir for example if that were so) but implies that Jesus' teaching is the teaching of God which must be heard and obeyed. And this is what Martha is simply not getting. She is so engrossed with the pressures of the kitchen that she is not noticing what is going on in the rest of the house. And when in her plea

to Jesus to get him to get Mary to help her she refers to Jesus as Lord, she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from him his.

One final point to pick up. Jesus' rebuke, although I think it sounds much more of a loving encouragement than a rebuke – he starts with 'Martha, Martha' surely that's a caring way of talking? Anyway, Jesus' response to Marta is this, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, there is need of only one thing. And Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her." What is that one thing? It is what Mary is doing. It is being focussed on the guest – on Jesus. So what Jesus is saying is two-fold – when you are doing hospitality focus on the guest – but also when you are doing life, focus on him.

So, where does that leave us all today? The key to this whole story is doing hospitality well – and you know that can be really difficult. If, for example, you have friends round for dinner, do you not find it a challenge some time to manage the kitchen and look after your guests at the same time? I know we do sometimes. But actually this goes wider than hospitality – it is about getting the right balance in our lives between doing, and learning. Being the practical person in church, the person who sets up for a service, the person who manages a heating project, the person who cleans the church, these are all vital jobs, but if they make you so busy that you no longer have time to join a study group, or read your bible, then perhaps somethings needs reviewing.

I think this reflection which I read the other day which comes from an American Catholic website is really helpful:

"So how will I treat Jesus when he sits at my table this holiday? Will I ignore him in favour of basting the turkey?"

I hope not. I hope to sit down and take in his beautiful face. I hope to spoon him the mashed potatoes that have been sitting in my crockpot since that morning because even if I'm not a natural Martha or Mary, I'm faking it all the way. Of course, "Mary chose the better part when she chose [Christ]" but since I want food on the table when my guests arrive I'll agree with Cardinal Anastasio Ballestrero, the former archbishop of Turin: "In our house there is room for Martha and room for Mary, and we must occupy both places. We must be Mary because we are welcoming the Word, and we must be Martha because we are receiving the Son of Man."

So the chairs and tables do still need putting away, and the practical help of neighbour needs to be done—but they all need to focus on the One in whose name we do them.

Amen