

Sermon 17 July 2022 Martha and Mary

Luke 10:38-42

As with the story of the Good Samaritan that we looked at last week, there are a range of pathways we could go down as we examine this interesting little story of Mary and Martha, and there has been much debate centred on the various aspects of this story.

On the one hand, it is about acknowledging that we are all very different and so we have different ways by which we approach and worship God. Martha is an activist; she serves Jesus through her actions. We need people like her, and apart from anything else, I believe the Christian gospel can really only come alive through that sort of approach. I remind you of the mandate as advocated by St Francis of Assisi, 'you worship God through service.'

And then we have Mary who sits at Jesus' feet and just listens to him. I will talk about this a little later but in reality we need to do this if we are going to serve effectively. So there is not a contradiction in these two approaches but rather there is a symbiosis.

The story is also an expression of the fact that, being different, we all have different gifts. The most important thing is to use whatever gifts we have to serve God. We can all contribute in some way.

One of the things that stands out for me in this story is, once again, we see Jesus defying convention. What do I mean by that? The people at the heart of this story are Mary and Martha, two women. We are told that Jesus and his disciples have arrived at the home of Mary and Martha, but there is no mention at all of the disciples. They were just in the background, I assume. Centre stage were Mary and Martha. Now you might say, 'So what!' Well, according to the custom of the time, the disciples, being men, should be gathered around Jesus and the women somewhere in the background, seen perhaps, but definitely not heard.

We get a good idea of just what the role of women was expected to be through some of the writings of Paul. Let me give you two examples. *'Women should be silent during church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says.'* 1 Corinthians 14:34. *'Women should listen and learn quietly and submissively. I do not let women teach men or have authority over them.'* 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

I want to make two points here. Firstly, Paul is just reflecting the custom and culture of the time. So it would be wrong to take those words literally.

The second point is this – yes, that was the convention of the time but Jesus challenged that convention. Jesus promoted women and in so doing defied all convention of the day. A wonderful example is Mary Magdalene, a fascinating woman who played a very significant role in Jesus' life and story. On Thursday we celebrate Mary Magdalene in our church calendar.

Even in our modern world, there is a continual tension between a traditional view of a woman's place in the grand scheme of things and what is deemed to be right and proper today. A little take on that involves that well-known saying that 'behind every successful man there is a good woman.' One of the problems with that statement is all too often the man is blissfully unaware of this.

There is a rather cute story told about the then Governor of Texas, Mark White. Governor White and his wife, Carol, were driving through the Texas countryside one day and happened to be around the area where Carol grew up. As they pulled into a gas station, Mark noticed a little nervousness with his wife. He didn't say anything, but when the attendant came out to the car, Mark began to notice what was really going on. Both his wife and the attendant looked surprised to see each other, and they acted with that awkwardness that two people have when they have been close in the past.

The Governor pretended not to notice this. As they continued their drive, neither said a word. Carol continued to stare out the window, lost in thought. After a while, Mark said, 'Honey, I couldn't help but notice how you and that gas attendant looked at each other. You were involved with each other at some stage in the past, weren't you?'

'Well, yes,' she replied. 'Well, I guess I know how you feel. I guess you were thinking how different your life would be if you had married him; that you would be the wife of a gas attendant rather than my wife. Right?'

'Well, no', she replied. 'I was thinking that he'd be the governor now.'

I want to focus on Mary for a moment. You know, I am all for expressing something of our faith through service, whatever shape and form that service might take. But here's the point, we need something of the Mary in order to be able to carry out that service. It is talking and listening to God (we call it prayer) that we receive the fuel for that work. That's what both sustains and energises us. That's what directs us.

There is the story of an explorer who was on an expedition on foot with Indian guides and porters through the Amazon forests of South America many years ago. The first two days they made excellent time; they were moving at a very good pace. On the third day, however, when it came time to set off in the morning, the explorer found his Indian guides and porters sitting back on their haunches, looking very sombre and making no moves towards getting under way.

'What's the matter?' the explorer asked a guide. 'It's a very serious problem,' replied the guide. 'The men say they cannot move any further until their souls have caught up with their bodies.'

This is precisely what Jesus is telling us in today's gospel. We must keep our bodies and souls together. We must keep the Martha and Mary inside us in balance.

Let's close with a prayer:

Lord, keep us from getting so involved in life that we forget why you gave us life. Keep us from getting so involved in living that we forget why we are living. Keep us from getting so involved in pursuing things money can buy that we lose the things money can't buy. Amen.