

Sermon 20 July 2025 Martha and Mary

1 Peter 4:10-11 Luke 10:38-42

As with the story of the Good Samaritan, which 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 different and so we have different ways by which we approach and worship God. It's one reason why we have different religions, and different denominations within those religions. In this case, 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 the feet of Jesus 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.

As I said, 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. I quote from our first reading: *'God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.'* 1 Peter 4:10. We have discussed this in some length over the past weeks.

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 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. 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 reflecting the custom and culture of the time. So it would be wrong to take those words literally in today's context.

The second point is this – yes, that was the convention of the time but Jesus, as he was inclined to do, 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 significant role in Jesus' life and story. On Tuesday we celebrate her in our church calendar.

Even in our modern world, there is often a 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 is that well-known saying, '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 about 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. As I am sure 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 Mary in order to be able to carry out that service. It is talking and listening to God. We call it prayer, and it is through that 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 with native guides and porters through the Amazon forests of South America many years ago. The first two days they made excellent time; they were moving a very good pace. On the third day, however, when it came to set off in the morning, the explorer found his guides sitting back on their haunches, looking very sombre and making no moves towards getting under way.

‘What’s the matter?’ the explorer asked one of the guides. ‘It’s a very serious problem,’ replied the guide. ‘The men say they cannot move 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 should not separate the spiritual from the physical. The physical should feed off the spiritual. We must keep the Martha and the Mary inside us in balance.

American author and spiritual advisor, Barbara de Angelis, wrote, *‘In order to experience everyday spirituality, we need to remember that we are spiritual beings spending some time in a human body.’* She is making the point that spirituality is not something separate from our daily lives, but rather an inherent part of our human existence.

Let me put it this way, our values are naturally shaped and moulded by our faith and our belief. It should go without saying, that our values, in turn, will shape and mould our decisions and our actions. As an example, we cannot say, ‘I try and keep my business life separate from my spiritual life.’ Our business decisions and involvement should reflect the values as embraced by our faith. Everything we do should reflect those values.

James says in James 2:14, *‘What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions?’*

I want to finish by saying this – we have often talked about how we can make a difference in people’s lives through service, but we can also have a positive influence on others through being a living example of the principles, values and faith we advocate.