

Sermon for 20th July 2025, Year C, Pentecost 6, Proper 11

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Luke 10:38-end

Sermon

After the parable of the Good Samaritan last week, here comes another famous passage in the gospel of Luke – the story of Mary and Martha – which divided Christians, and women in particular, into two groups for the next two millennia. You're either a 'Martha', who fusses around doing all the practical busywork, getting annoyed at everyone else who isn't also working, or you're a Mary, head in the clouds but no earthly good. And to make things worse, Jesus says that Mary is better, which just annoys all the fed-up Marthas even more.

Hands up who is on some kind of rota this morning, or has already prepared the Sunday dinner for when you get home, or done some household chores? You're probably not feeling very positive towards little miss goody-two-shoes Mary, the teacher's pet, at this precise moment!

This morning I'd like to reassure you that perhaps this passage has not been very well understood over the years. But let's start with the traditional understanding of the story. Mary and Martha are at home in Bethany. Jesus arrives unexpectedly with numerous male disciples in tow. They are hungry and thirsty and need a place to rest. Martha goes into a frenzy of food preparation. Mary, her irresponsible (possibly younger) sister, sneaks out of the kitchen to listen to Jesus. Martha, having irritably banged pots around to no avail, comes looking for Mary and finds her at Jesus's feet. Against all propriety she's sitting in the company of men, as if she were a disciple! Martha grumpily demands that Jesus tell Mary to get back to her proper woman's work. Jesus however criticises

Martha's busywork and her bossy attitude, and indicates that Mary 'got it right' with her attentive, passive, and adoring posture.

This has led to centuries of Christian commentary declaring that active practical service is always inferior to contemplative prayer, study, and worship. Thus, the white-collar worker, the academic and the monk are morally superior to those who work with their hands – and especially superior to women's work in kitchens and later in factories. And some have even concluded that the highest calling a woman can aspire to is to be obedient to male authority and listen passively and silently to their teaching.

Martin Luther during the Reformation really stuck the knife in. He said "Martha, your work must be punished and regarded as worthless... I want no work but that of Mary, which is faith." How pompous!

And so, Mary and Martha became examples throughout history, creating divides between Faith and Good Works, between Protestant and Catholic, between New Testament and Old Testament, even between Christianity and Judaism, with Martha being seen as representing the onerous demands of the Law, and Mary representing God's liberating Grace.

But is this really what the Scripture says? If you read it carefully, you may spot some things that we've assumed but which aren't actually written in the text.

For example, we assume that Martha has gone into the kitchen to prepare food for all the disciples. However, there's nothing here to suggest she's preparing food. The word given for the work she is doing is '*daikonia*' in the Greek, from which we get the word deacon. When Jesus and the male disciples do ministry it is the same word, *daikonia*. So Martha is doing ministry in the same sense that the disciples are doing ministry.

Also, in the earliest copies of the scripture, Martha doesn't welcome Jesus '*into her home*', she simply '*receives Jesus*', which can mean she received him as her

rabbi, her teacher. No home is mentioned, and in the latest edition of the NRSV bible which we use, this phrase has been removed. So, the text simply says that Martha is a disciple of Jesus and very active in ministry – about which she is anxious.

And there's more. The translation which reads "She had a sister Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet" ignores the Greek word '*kai*' which means 'and', or 'also'. So that line actually says, "She had a sister Mary who *also* sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." In other words, Martha is portrayed as one of Jesus' wider group of disciples, along with Mary. They are perhaps two of the women who travelled with Jesus, learning from him, and supporting him.

And this learning from Jesus as a disciple is not a one-off event for these women. The Greek makes it clear that this is something that has gone on over a long period of time.

Now, we may be stretching the argument, but in the story, we don't even know if Mary is present. Neither Martha nor Jesus actually speaks to her directly. Is it possible then that Mary is away doing ministry with the larger group when this event takes place? After all, the disciples aren't mentioned either. If you look carefully, only Jesus is mentioned entering the village. I wonder if what Martha is really annoyed about is that Mary is away travelling and ministering with the other disciples, while Martha is struggling along on her own? She wants her sister back to help.

So, what is Jesus now saying? That practical work is worthless and sitting passively in prayer is the only worthy vocation, especially for women? No. The only thing he criticises is Martha's anxiety, not her work. After all, Jesus himself serves at the Last Supper and continually praises those who serve others.

I think what we might be seeing here are two beloved disciples, both involved in ministry, just as Jesus' other disciples are, and the only difference is that in this one instance, Martha is unnecessarily anxious.

What then is Mary's 'better part, which will not be taken away from her'? Well, it's probably not the vocation of sitting adoringly at Jesus' feet while others do all the cooking and cleaning.

The Greek words are perhaps better translated as 'good portion' rather than 'better part', and this echoes the Old Testament Psalms where *God* is often referred to as the good portion – the best thing one could possibly inherit or receive as a gift. Even more significantly, to receive a good portion always comes with a duty to pass it on, to share it with others. So, the good portion that Mary received comes with the invitation to actively share it with other people.

Here then is my belief: no passive women these, never leaving the home, whose only role is to cook for the men or listen to their wisdom. Both are strong women, active in ministry, lovers of God, supporters of Jesus both materially and spiritually, personally engaged in the same work as the other disciples. And in case we doubt the high esteem in which Martha in particular is held by Jesus, there are only 7 people in the bible whom God calls to his service by repeating their name: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Simon (who became Peter), Saul (who became Paul), and Martha – Martha being the only woman in that esteemed list.

So please give up any notion that practical work is inferior or unspiritual. Jesus calls everyone to love and serve each other's practical needs; he simply invites us to let go of any associated anxiety, and trust that in God's kingdom, all shall be well, and all shall be well.