

23rd March 2025 – LENT: The Rest is Worship (3) – ‘Being present to God’s rest’ (Luke 10:38-42)

Lord of pots and pans and things: since I’ve not time to be
A saint by doing lovely things, or watching late with Thee;
Or dreaming in the dawn light or storming Heaven’s gates;
Make me a saint by getting meals, and washing up the plates.

Although I must have Martha’s hands, I have a Mary mind:
And when I clean the boots and shoes, Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth, each time I scrub the floor
Accept this meditation, Lord, I haven’t time for more.

My mum had that poem pinned to the wall of our kitchen as I was growing up. She was a full-time homemaker with four young children, and its words were precious to her. Even now, I can recite it more or less off by heart, the words are etched in mind. ‘Although I must have Martha’s hands, I have a Mary mind...’

The story of Mary and Martha has long been one of the most treasured narratives in Scripture. **Who doesn’t identify with hardworking Martha**, frustrated with her captivated sister at the feet of the Lord? And **who doesn’t admire the single-minded devotion of Mary?** She was so enraptured with Jesus’ teaching that, to quote the beloved hymn, “the things of earth [had grown] strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”

I wonder which of them you identify with? If I were to hazard a guess, **I would imagine most of you feel more like Martha than Mary.** It is perhaps the curse of our modern world. From an early age we are taught to be human doings rather than human beings – to be useful, to achieve, to work. And don’t get me wrong, these are all good – as we looked at last week, we are made to work, to be fruitful. We are made to serve as well – Jesus wasn’t criticising Martha for her servant heart. So what is Jesus saying? Let’s go back to the story:

It all started when Jesus came to Bethany, to visit the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They had become close personal friends of Jesus during His earthly ministry. He had a profound love for their family, and it’s clear from Luke’s account that Jesus made Himself at home in their house.

Certainly hospitality was a special hallmark of this family. Martha in particular is portrayed everywhere as a meticulous hostess. And the fact that her name was usually listed first whenever she’s named with her siblings implies strongly that she was the elder sister of Mary and Lazarus. She’s the classic eldest sibling, mature and sensible, with an overly developed sense of responsibility (I’m the eldest of 4, I know the character traits!).

Jesus had apparently come at Martha’s invitation. She was the one who welcomed Him in, signifying that she was the actual master of ceremonies in this house. On this occasion, at least, Martha wasn’t merely filling in as a surrogate hostess for a friend; she was plainly the one in charge of the household. She fussed over her hostess duties. She wanted everything to be just right. She was a conscientious and considerate hostess, and these were admirable traits. And let’s emphasise again: much in Martha’s behaviour was commendable.

I love the way Jesus comes across in this scene. He’s the perfect houseguest. He instantly makes Himself at home. He enjoys the fellowship and conversation, and as always, His contribution to the discussion is instructive and enlightening. No doubt His disciples were asking Him questions, and He was giving answers that were thought-provoking, authoritative, and utterly edifying. Mary’s instinct was to sit at His feet and listen. Martha, ever the fastidious one – the organiser and planner – went right to work with her preparations.

Soon, however, Martha grew irritable with Mary. I'm sure it's easy to imagine how her exasperation might have elevated. At first, *she probably tried to hint in a "subtle" way that she needed help, by making extra noise*—maybe moving some pots and pans around with a little more vigour than the situation really required, and then by letting some utensils or cookware clatter together loudly in a washbasin. Martha might have cleared her throat or exhaled a few times loudly enough to be heard in the next room. Anything to remind Mary that her sister was expecting a little help.

When all of that failed, Martha probably tried to peek around the corner or walk briskly through to the dining room, hoping to catch Mary's eye. In the end, however, *she just gave up all pretence of subtlety or civility and aired her grievance against Mary right in front of Jesus.* In fact, she complained to Him and asked Him to intervene and set Mary straight.

I wonder what she made of Jesus' reply? What do *we* make of it? For all that it's one of people's favourite stories, this is actually one of the most misunderstood passages of the bible. As our Lent book observes in ch10, it's often taught in a way to make the Marthas of this world feel guilty. The natural planners and organisers are made to feel spiritually deficient – only one step ahead of the legalistic, hard-hearted Pharisees. But that's not what Jesus is getting at here. The key word, as the book indicates, is 'distracted'. **What Jesus is gently pointing out to Martha is not the value of her work, but her priorities.** Jesus loves Martha as much as Mary, and in fact he relates to her in a different way to Mary. When their brother Lazarus dies, he cries with Mary but he *talks* with Martha. It's Martha who receives that great word: 'I am the resurrection in the life.' You could say he relates to Martha more as a peer – the greatest leader of them all recognising another gifted leader.

So, Jesus has huge respect for Martha – but what's going on here is that she's missing the wood for the trees. She's stuck in social respectability mode – a guest has arrived and jobs need to be done. But **Jesus is not just a guest: he's a friend, and all he wants is her company, her time, her attention. He wants her heart, before he wants her hands.** Or as he puts it: 'only one thing is needed.'
(REPEAT) Jesus first, other stuff later.

If you're a Martha by nature, this is such an important lesson to listen to. **Jesus first, tasks second. Jesus wants your heart, before he wants your hands.** It's never wrong to give Jesus time first – usually you'll find that the tasks go better anyway. In my experience God always gives you the time back. I've learnt a hard lesson which I still get wrong frequently – I'll often do anything rather than knuckle down and write a sermon or a bible study or even sometimes just have a normal quiet time – I'll check my emails, deal with some admin, read an improving article. I think to myself – 'if I can just get the boring stuff done first I'll concentrate better'. But I never do. On the other hand, if I do the God stuff first, I keep finding the rest goes better. Jesus first, tasks later.

But if you're a Mary, there's a lesson here too – Jesus isn't saying that you can sit at his feet forever – at least not this side of heaven. There is work to be done – if he wants your heart first before your hands, he does also want your hands. Work and worship go hand in hand – indeed work *is* worship if it's dedicated to God. Which is good news for the Marthas too. Jesus loves your work, if it's expression of your love for him, rather than an idol which you serve anxiously or angrily.

As I close, Chapter 10 of our Lent book invites us to go deeper and to reflect on what influences our priorities. What causes us to feel that our tasks are all-important, they can't be laid down? As the book says: 'This is not a rebuke [to Martha] to stop working, it's an invitation to let go of her anxieties at Jesus' feet.' The chapter closes with the lyrics of a song; I'll finish with some of them here, and may they speak to our souls today: 'Martha I love you and see the work that you've done. It pleases me that you want to serve everyone – but don't forget that I'm right here. I know you find it hard to ask for help. Be brave enough to recognise that surrender isn't a weak thing, submission isn't a dirty word, you don't have to be in control all the time. Oh Martha, come and rest, come and rest in my presence. I love you Martha. I love you Martha, my child.' Amen.