**Mary and Martha**

The gospel passage we have just heard is short and simple. Jesus and the disciples are invited into the house of Martha and Mary. Martha prepares a meal whilst Mary chooses to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to Him. When Martha complains, Jesus sides with Mary. Martha has got it wrong. Mary has got it right. And that is the end of my sermon. (PAUSE)

Well, we have got 10 minutes to kill before the creed, so can I suggest that we use that time to explore what I have just said and test it against what the passage actually says. Like all simple statements, it contains a kernel of truth but misses so much of the nuance.

Let’s start with Martha. Over the years, she has received considerable criticism for being busy doing housework, whilst the Son of God sits in the next room teaching profound things about God. She has become an archetypal woman, fussing over inconsequential matters, seeking perfection in the mundane. It will come as no surprise to you that sermons with this slant were written mainly by men. In recent years people, mainly women, have come to her rescue. In a bible study group that I used to attend, one of our members, who is herself an exceptional hostess, gave one of the most impassioned defences of Mary’s hospitality I have ever heard – so much so that I have wondered if Jesus had been subject to her indignation, He might have chosen to retract His statement. And Martha’s hospitality is the point. Many recent critiques have pointed out that hospitality was a major emphasis in this culture – the need to feed people being a measure of the honour given to visitors. In the passage just prior to this one, Jesus sends out 72 disciples to spread the good news about the kingdom of God. And the key measure of how they are to treat those they go to, is how they are received and if they are invited in to eat and drink. The writer of this gospel has deliberately placed these two events together to force us to think about what was going on. Martha wasn’t simply busy doing housework, she was busy providing hospitality by preparing to feed Jesus and his group. This was part of her service. She wasn’t just doing household tasks; this was her ministry.

But inspite of this rehabilitation of Martha, we cannot miss the fact that Jesus does say that “Mary has chosen what is better”. But if what Martha is doing is vital, which it is, what is Jesus criticising? Jesus doesn’t take Martha to task over what she is doing. He takes her to task over the fact she has become distracted. And that begs the question, how is she being distracted? We will return to that question.

So whilst we are holding that thought, let’s now consider Mary. Mary is silent in this story, but her silence and Jesus’ comments speak volumes. She has, in Jesus’ words, “chosen the better way”. This implies that she has moved beyond distractions. But that doesn’t mean that she hasn’t faced them. And the distraction is not simply that she has opted out of meal preparation. The distraction is cultural expectation. The cultural context helps us to understand the profundity of Mary’s posture. In Jewish tradition, “sitting at the feet” was what a disciple did. In Acts 22:3, the apostle Paul tells us that he was educated “at the feet of Gamaliel.” Gamaliel, an esteemed rabbi in Israel, trained Paul.

Mary sits at the feet of her rabbi, Jesus. Since this was the posture assumed by a disciple, we can safely conclude that Mary was a disciple of Jesus. Mary, a woman in a male-dominated world, had chosen to sit as a disciple. And it is unlikely that that act would not have been the end of the distractions facing her. I wonder how many of Jesus’ male disciples would have been happy about that. Given how tetchy they could be with each other, I suspect that this upset them. As Mary sits at Jesus’ feet, I imagine many frosty stares and shaking of heads. But the most vocal distraction comes from her sister, Martha.

It isn’t difficult to take from the passage how cross Martha is. So cross that she can’t even refer to her sister by name or speak to her directly. In truth perhaps it is Jesus she is really cross with, for allowing this to happen. The problem is, He is the master, so maybe she feels she cannot quite direct her anger at Him.

So after all that nuancing, it feels like we are back where I started: with Mary in the right and Martha in the wrong. And often at this point, everyone in the congregation would be invited to decide whether you are a Martha or a Mary in your discipleship. But not so fast. One passage does not define the characters of Martha and Mary. It only gives us a glimpse of one passing moment in their lives; a moment when we see Martha invited to make a decision on the depth of her discipleship. A moment when we see Mary, sat at Jesus’ feet, listening.

So what does Martha do? What does Mary hear? We don’t know. The gospel passage doesn’t tell us. Like so many gospel passages, it does not tell us the answer because it invites us to engage with the question. We are neither Mary nor Martha. But we all face the sort of moments that Martha and Mary face here.

So what distractions can we face? Well, the every-day demands of family, busyness of life, and diversion of social media come immediately to mind and I’m sure you can add plenty of other things into the mix. But I did make the point earlier in my talk that what Martha was doing was ministry. So perhaps the question to challenge ourselves with, is this: “Is there anything in my ministry, as important and valuable as that ministry might be, that distracts me from going deeper into my relationship with God?” Jesus was not criticising Martha’ ministry; He was offering her something deeper; something she may not even have thought possible. So we should ask ourselves, “Is there something else I could be doing; something that my own expectations or the views of those around me, stop me from doing? What prevents me from sitting at the feet of Jesus and enjoying a deeper relationship?”

And when we are at the feet of Jesus, what will we hear? Well that will be between God and you. Just as it was between Jesus and Mary. But it will be weighty. The Old Testament passage we heard today indicates that. The passage involves the visit of three strangers to Abraham and Sarah. But we know that they are not three ordinary strangers – the passage tells us it is the Lord God. The visit gives rise to considerable activity – the hospitality of feeding guests – much the same activity as Martha undertook. But in the middle of all that both Abraham and Sarah took time to listen in to the conversation. What they heard undoubtedly shocked them – that Sarah would have a child within a year. The stories in Genesis lay bare all the complicated feelings and reactions around that.

Now I am not for one minute suggesting that sitting at Jesus’ feet will produce a message of that staggering magnitude. But the key point for us, is that the listening they did on that day changed both of them. And listening will change us. That might strike you as just too far-fetched. It might give you a sense of imposter syndrome. Surely I am not worthy of being in that position? Or the worry that others may not think it is right that we are in that position. Well, it’s true, none of us are worthy of being in that position. But it is worth pondering that the one who Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, describes as “…the first born over all creation… who is before all things and who holds all things together” is the one who make us worthy. He invites us to join Him just as He invited Martha and He affirms us when we sit as His feet, just as He did with Mary.