A painting of a person and person

Description automatically generated**What exactly did Martha get wrong in Luke 10?**

Are you a Mary or a Martha? I wonder how many times you’ve heard the question!

Sometimes it’s nuanced a little and develops into a query as to how well we are balancing the practical and the spiritual in our lives, but there’s a long shadow of interpretation that says that Martha’s busy-ness with the practical (bad) is insignificant by comparison with Mary’s contemplative stillness (good), as she sits at Jesus’ feet. Put this way, it becomes a story that privileges contemplation over action.

But, what exactly did Martha get wrong? Surely she was right to provide hospitality to Jesus and his band of hungry disciples when they turned up on the doorstep? Why does Martha seem to get criticised for doing what any half-decent host would rightly do? I’m always a bit disappointed that Luke changes the scene immediately, and we don’t get to hear Martha’s reaction to Jesus’ words, which I suspect might have been quite a strong one…!

Let’s look at the text and the situation it portrays more closely, noticing the background and some of the details. As we pay attention to these, Luke 10 may begin to appear in a different perspective.

The sisters, Martha and Mary, are familiar to us from John’s Gospel as residents of Bethany near Jerusalem and as the family of Lazarus ‘who Jesus loved.’ According to John, it was Mary who poured perfume over the feet of Jesus at the beginning of the Passover week that led to his death (John 12.1-8). Judas objects to the waste of money involved: ‘Why wasn’t the perfume sold to benefit the poor?’ Mary’s is a prophetic act, anointing Jesus with the oils usually used on a dead body. From then on a pungent smell would have followed him, advertising him as a ‘dead man walking’, anointed for burial ahead of time. It’s Mary who sees that at the feast to celebrate the raising of her brother, it is surprisingly not the revived life of Lazarus but the imminent death of Jesus that should be the focus.

Judas’s valuation of the oil also catches my attention. The oil of nard could have been sold for 300 denarii, he says. Assuming that a denarius is a day’s wage for a labourer, this is about a year’s worth of pay, and we can quickly do the sums and reckon that perhaps, in today’s terms, this jar of oil was worth around £20-30,000, an astonishing figure even if my calculation is only half-accurate.

If that’s the case, it resets our picture of this family and their house. This is probably not a humble peasant dwelling, if they can afford to have such a costly jar of oil waiting for use on a shelf somewhere. More likely it’s a villa for a well-to-do family. It may be pushing the text too far, but it also sounds as if there are servants around to whom Jesus can give orders: ‘Take away the stone’, ‘Unbind him’. It’s striking that it’s only in John’s Gospel that we hear of Lazarus himself. In Luke’s Gospel the householder is identified as Martha (Luke 10.38, literally, ‘Martha received him’ implies that she is in charge of the house). This has suggested to many commentators that Lazarus was an invalid or disabled in some way (he might also perhaps have been a child still) and that Martha ran the family business and estates, something unusual in a Jewish setting but not unprecedented. Given that, apparently, it was easily possible to accommodate Jesus and 12 disciples at the house, it seems to have been a pretty big place, owned by a pretty wealthy family.

Reframing the house also helps us to catch a glimpse of Martha herself, the linch-pin on whom everything depends rather than simply a harassed housewife. Maintaining such a set-up would have needed great skill and unrelenting concentration on her part, a woman in what was very much a man’s world. Mary reproaches Jesus for not being there (John 11.32),but Martha raises a practical objection to Jesus’ proposal to open the tomb: ‘But he smells – it’s already the fourth day since he died’ (John 11.40). If Martha is determinedly practical, perhaps it’s because she has had to be in order to hold her place in society and to keep her family together.

Back in Luke 10, this seems to be Martha’s issue. She is busy arranging hospitality. Putting up the group of disciples and Jesus would certainly have involved ‘much service’ (Luke 10.40). The scandal is that Martha asks Jesus, the guest, to intervene in a family dispute, something which crosses normal boundaries, but may also speak of the absence of a male authority figure in the family. She appeals to Jesus to get Mary to help her: ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister’s left me to serve on my own?’ (Luke 10.40); in other words, ‘Why doesn’t anyone care that everything depends on me!’ It is a pretty strange question to ask of a visitor and gives a good idea of the strain which Martha is under. Jesus’ answer to her is not a condemnation but a consolation. He repeats her name to comfort her, ‘Martha, Martha’, as you might to soothe a child.

‘You’re anxious and distracted about many things,’ Jesus continues. It would be surprising if this were a rebuke about activity, given that the rest of Luke Chapter 10 is largely about action: the Seventy Disciples are commissioned to go off and act, and Jesus rejoices that, in their actions, the action of God is seen (Luke 10.1-24); the following story, of the Good Samaritan, ends with the punch-line, ‘Go and *do* the same.’ Rather, it seems to me, it is the anxiety and distraction, not the tasks themselves that are the focus of Jesus’ response to Martha.

So what exactly has Martha done wrong? Jesus says that she is ‘anxious and distracted’, but the word for distracted is *thorubazomai*, which usually carries the meaning of ‘being in an uproar’, a commotion or loud clamouring, and is applied to crowds rather than people. An idiomatic way of translating the phrase might be, ‘You’re anxious and there are lots of voices clamouring in your head.’ That’s actually a pretty good description of what it’s like when we’re extremely anxious.

Jesus’ teaching on worry and distraction is in Luke 12.22-31 (paralleled in Matthew 6.25-34). Martha seems to be anxious that it’s all down to her, and the heart of Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom is that it’s really not down to her at all. Ultimately it is the heavenly Father who takes care of all these things. Action that flows from that understanding will not be anxious. Action without receiving this grace first leads to anxiety. Which is not to say anxiety in itself is wrong – it’s a perfectly reasonable response - but the antidote to it is to do as Mary has done, and stop, sit and receive, and only then to go on and act.

Sermons on this passage often, in my experience, focus on Martha in the kitchen, banging the pots and pans frustratedly (OK – probably most of the sermons I’ve heard on this passage are ones I’ve preached myself!). Actually the passage doesn’t really focus on food, but even if it did, again given the emphasis on the importance of meals in Luke’s Gospel, it’s unlikely that this would be the gist of rebuke to Martha by Jesus. Traditional interpretations often contrast Martha’s concentration on feeding the physical body with Mary’s attention to the spiritual, and then draw the moral that the spiritual matters and the physical doesn’t, something hard to square with Jesus’ actual teaching. Yet food does hover on the margins of the story, and particularly in Jesus’ words about Mary, that she has ‘chosen the better part/portion’ (Luke 10.42). The ‘part/portion’ is *meris*, your share of a meal. Jesus is saying that Mary has chosen (it’s clearly her initiative) the best bit of the meal on offer – which is not the food but the company, and, specifically, his presence.

In a big house with a wealthy host, hospitality dictated a sumptuous meal, the kind of thing which we imagine is being described in John 12.1-3 at the feast for Lazarus, as the guests recline around a table in civilised Roman style. But was this what really mattered? Proverbs 15.17 talks about a simple dinner of vegetables, with love, being better than a fatted ox with hatred. Mary’s focus seems to be on Jesus’ company. In the anxiety of seeking to get the hospitality right, perhaps Martha has lost sight of what it’s for in the first place. In the end this meal is a setting for friends to gather, where the Son of Man can feel at home. Jesus’ company and his words are what will last from this encounter; they are what no-one will take away from Mary (Luke 10.42).

Though it’s inevitably speculative, I’m tempted to read this story in Luke as taking place when John’s narrative of the banquet happens, at the beginning of Jesus’ last Passover week, and, indeed, being part of the same event. If so, there is an added dimension to Mary’s response to Jesus.

Luke doesn’t identify the ‘certain village’ (Luke 10.38) with Bethany (Luke’s narrative scheme is tightly focused after 9.51 with Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem; identifying Bethany would have conflicted with this). But if this story is read with John 12 it gains an extra resonance, for then it takes place in a week of ‘last suppers’ when Jesus reminds the disciples that they will not always have him with them (John 12.8). Martha’s distraction, the voices in her head that call her away, might rob her of what will, in the end, become the most precious moments of her life as the presence of God, in Jesus, fills her house as the scent of the oil does, for the final time in his life. It’s easy to miss the presence of God in the midst of her everyday cares.

So what exactly did Martha get wrong? Perhaps just that, that her activity *for* God led her to a place where she might miss the presence *of* God. The ‘one thing necessary’ (Luke 10.42) is letting the presence of God come to us, wherever and however that may be, in the midst of activity or the quietness of contemplation, and being alert for it. The moment can’t be caught and held, but it can be real nonetheless. It subdues our anxieties and calms our fears, quietens the conflicting voices in our heads, and it can’t be taken away.

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