

A sermon preached by Emma Hodge on 21st July 2019 at St. Michael and All Angels, Sandhurst

*May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Strength and Our Redeemer. **Amen***

Today's sermon is based on our gospel reading – which is the story of Mary and Martha; and you may have heard this passage, and a sermon on it before. You may also be thinking that it is a nice simple passage – it's all about the importance of time management so that we can spend time with Jesus, studying the bible etc and not get distracted by everything else – or is it?

Let's start by looking at the background of this passage.

This story only appears in Luke's Gospel, and Luke's gospel is well known for featuring the stories of women. It is in Luke's gospel that we have the Annunciation, the Magnificat, the visit of Mary to Elizabeth to name just the first few and it is only in Luke's gospel do we have these six verses about Jesus visiting the home of Martha.

Martha and Mary are sisters, we know from John's Gospel that they had a brother called Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead and that they lived in a village called Bethany which about three miles from Jerusalem.

Today's story is set in Martha's home and Martha has welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home. Welcoming Jesus and his disciples to their home would have required work from the hostess, not only would they have to feed them, but they would need to ensure that their feet were washed (something a lot of modern hostesses don't need to worry about!)

We know from the encounter in John's gospel that Martha's faith is strong. She is the one who believes that her brother who had recently died would rise again on the last day, and when Jesus stated that **he is "the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.** And when Jesus asks Martha **Do you believe this?"** (John chapter 11 verses 25 and 26) Martha responds stating that she believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world.

In today's story from Luke's gospel, we see Martha in the traditional role of hostess and home maker. It was her home that Jesus and his disciples were in and she was busy in the kitchen ensuring that there was food for everyone once Jesus has had finished his teaching session with his disciples. Martha's faith was demonstrated in her hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. Wondering

Rabbis or teachers were common in Jesus' day and it was a custom for people to open up their homes to the Rabbis and their disciples and offer them hospitality and shelter. In today's story we see Martha portraying the traditional, culturally and socially correct role of a woman.

Now let's look at Martha's sister, Mary

Again we see Mary at the story of the raising of Lazarus where we also see her faith in Jesus. In John's gospel, we see Mary taking the role of the grieving sister.

In today's story, Mary is in a different role, Mary is described as "**also sitting at the feet of Jesus**". This phrase is seemingly innocent today and we often don't read too much into it, however there is a cultural background that would have been obvious to those in the passage and the first readers of the gospel, which we need to understand. When someone is described as sitting at the feet of another person, it means that they are a disciple or student of the teacher.

This is not the only instance of the phrase 'sitting at the feet' is used in the New Testament. In Acts chapter 22 Paul describes that he sat "**at the feet of Gamaliel**", Gamaliel was another Rabbi and by stating this, Paul attributes how his Jewish faith originally developed is due largely to Gamaliel.

However today's passage is unique in the fact that it refers to a woman sitting at the feet of someone. All the other occasions it is men who sit and listen to the teachers. Disciples were generally the people who sat at the feet of Jesus and in Jesus' time, the word Disciples only applied to men. Mary, by sitting at Jesus' feet is subtly challenging society's norms. She was quietly stating that all people are worthy to be disciples. The same is true now. The message and learning in the bible is for everyone, whoever they are, not just people who look and think like us. We need to ensure that everyone is welcomed into the church and not turned away by our attitudes.

Mary, by sitting at the feet of Jesus, quietly challenges people's attitudes; this time around the role of women.

If we now move onto the interchange between Martha and Jesus. Martha questions why Jesus has not objected to a female disciple and in doing so she draws attention to the fact that she is doing all the work of the hostess and that Mary (who may well have been her younger sister) was not doing anything, and in doing so, she is also questioning Mary's actions. Martha objects to Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, but she doesn't come out in the open and object, instead she complains in another manner.

Martha clearly expects a specific response from Jesus, but Jesus does not respond in the way Martha expects, he knew that Martha was not just concerned about being a good hostess and preparing food, His words

“**Martha you are worried about many things**” shows this, Martha had only complained about **one** thing, not **many** things, the other concern that the original readers of the gospel would have understood is the fact that Mary was sitting as a disciple, as if she was a man, something that challenged society’s norms. Martha is the only one recorded as voicing the concern, however we do not know how many other people in the room also challenged by Mary’s actions.

So what are the lessons we can learn from this passage

Firstly

The bible is not always easy to understand. When you read a passage in the bible it can have multiple meanings. This passage is a clear example. On the surface it is a simple message that we need to ensure that we manage our time well, spend time with Jesus and don’t ignore the opportunities that God presents us with.

This is of course true; however as explained, when you start looking at the culture and context that the passage was written in then other points become clear. These points need to be considered as when they are understood then the passage has a **deeper** meanings or could even change the meaning of the words. This is because the bible is a collection of books and letters which were written by different people, at a different time, in a different society and culture. What would be clear to someone then, does not necessarily mean that it is clear to us. This means that we need to be **prepared to be challenged** by what we thought we knew and in doing so we grow as Christians.

We all need to grow in faith.

Secondly

Mary showed courage by her actions of sitting at Jesus feet, a role that was not usually conducted by women.

We need to have the same courage that Mary showed. We need to challenge people’s attitudes, this doesn’t mean aggressively but rather as Mary did, just gently and quietly. Just because it has always been done one way, does not mean it should always be done that way.

As I close, spending time with Jesus, especially through bible study is important, but we need to understand the context and culture of the bible passages, and there is not one context or culture for the whole bible! In doing so we need to be prepared to be challenged by what we come to understand. We also need to have the courage of Mary to challenge people in their attitudes and this can include their attitude to what they believe.

This week we have seen the announcement of the new bishop of Reading, Olivia Graham who is currently our Archdeacon. However much we are rejoicing at this wonderful news, and the role model that it provides for young girls (as mentioned in an interview by Olivia Graham following her visit to Ranelagh on Monday) there are some people who will be very upset by the fact that a woman is their bishop and they will put up objections and will refuse to accept her authority. While we can continue to pray for them, I also hope that they are prepared to read the bible and reflect on passages such as the one today, where it is clear that Jesus welcomed women as disciples.

Questions for reflection

This story shows that Mary and Jesus challenge's attitudes in a subtle way (there are other instances in the gospel which show Jesus challenging attitudes in a more confrontational way). What attitudes do we come across which need challenging?

As Mary is described as learning from Jesus, and Paul from Gamaliel, who did you learn your faith from?

Who learns their faith from you?