

Mary and Martha

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 20th July 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Introduction: the two sisters

I wonder what your initial reaction was to hearing this story about the two sisters, Martha and Mary? If you were already familiar with the story, you will no doubt have thought about this before.

You may have been aligning yourself with either Martha or Mary: are you the type of person who's happier getting on with practical tasks, getting things done, or the more contemplative type, who likes to think about things, listen to ideas or plan great schemes? To put it in concrete terms, do you live out your Christian faith by serving on the coffee rota or helping in the churchyard, or by going to a bible study meeting? Or both?

Or you may have been wrestling with the apparent unfairness of Jesus' response to Martha – either siding with her as the hard-working and unappreciated hostess, struggling to entertain 13 guests; or trying to justify Jesus' words because you know he must be right, even if his response to Martha seems wrong.

Understanding Martha and Mary

Let's begin by thinking about these two sisters. Apart from this incident in Luke's Gospel, Martha and Mary also appear in the Gospel of John. In John chapter 11 we learn that they had a brother called Lazarus, and that the three siblings were friends of Jesus. John tells us that Lazarus became ill and the sisters sent Jesus a message, hoping for him to come and heal him. When Jesus arrives too late, both feel massively let down. Martha comes out to meet Jesus and expresses her disappointment. Mary stays in the house, grieving. Jesus weeps with the sisters, and then brings Lazarus back to life.

In the following chapter of John's gospel, Jesus is again in Bethany, where the family live, and a dinner party is thrown for him. Guess who's serving the food? Martha, of course. And while this is going on, Mary is pouring perfume over Jesus' feet as an act of love. Although there's no reason to believe that Luke and John knew each other, their descriptions of these two sisters match each other perfectly.

So Martha is the practical, proactive one. She takes initiatives, she sees what needs doing and does it, and she is prepared to speak her mind, even rebuking the respected rabbi, Jesus. Mary is clearly a more introverted, contemplative type of person. She not only admires Jesus, but wants to learn from him, and here in Luke's gospel, as Jesus is invited to dinner, Mary has that chance to sit at his feet and soak up his wisdom. She cherishes every moment she can spend with him, and forgets about her sister working away in the kitchen to provide a slap-up meal for Jesus and his disciples.

This is certainly a story which may make us feel uncomfortable. We can easily understand Martha's point of view. She is cross with Mary for not helping her in the kitchen, but she's even more cross with Jesus for not noticing that Mary has opted out of the meal preparation. You can't miss the hurt in her voice as she says, "Lord, do you not *care* that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."¹

Jesus' response

So how does Jesus respond? Maybe you could ask yourself, if I were Jesus, what would I have said? Perhaps an answer that sought to acknowledge the needs of both sisters: "Martha, you're doing a wonderful job, and I do appreciate all your hard work. I do also love the fact that Mary wants to learn more about God. She's going to be a great disciple. Maybe, Mary, you could help Martha finish off in the kitchen, and we'll catch up again after lunch".

Well, Jesus does show appreciation and sympathy for Martha – at least, that's the way I read it. But he doesn't agree that Mary should go and help in the kitchen.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things"². There's a lot of affection in that "Martha, Martha". And he acknowledges how stressed Martha feels as she tries to get the lunch ready for Jesus and (we assume) his 12 disciples.

¹ Luke 10:40 NRSV

² Verse 41

But Jesus is clear in his defence of Mary. “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”³

In the same way, at the dinner party in John’s gospel Jesus defends Mary again. This time Judas criticises her for “wasting” the very expensive perfume she is pouring over Jesus’ feet, when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. “Leave her alone”, Jesus says, and says that Mary was anointing his body for burial.⁴

True discipleship

The fact that Mary has such expensive perfume may indicate that the family were quite wealthy. And this throws more light on the behaviour of both Martha and Mary in this episode in Luke’s gospel. We might imagine, from our own context, that Martha is alone in the kitchen. But in first century Palestine a family with means would have servants, and Martha is almost certainly not without help in the kitchen.

There is another big difference between our society and theirs. Here women and men alike have access to education, and women are just as likely as men to go to university, and even become professors. But in first century Jewish culture there were very clear demarcations between the roles men and women were expected to fulfil. Women did not sit at the feet of rabbis. That was what men did. Women had a very important role looking after the home and the family.

³ Verse 42

⁴ John 12:1-8

There were no washing machines, electric or gas ovens, supermarkets or ready-meals. There was plenty of practical work to keep them busy, work that was crucial to the functioning of the family and society itself.

But Mary has crossed a boundary. She is sitting in the reception room with the men, listening to this great rabbi Jesus as an equal disciple. No doubt Martha could have done with Mary's help in the kitchen. But, as Tom Wright suggests in his book *Luke for Everyone*,⁵ there is more to Martha's indignation than her busyness with food preparation. Perhaps Martha thinks that Mary is getting above herself, and that makes Martha feel that her own contribution is being somehow devalued.

Whatever is going on in Martha's mind, Jesus is insistent that Mary's choice to spend time learning from him and becoming his disciple will not be taken away from her.

If you know Luke's gospel well, you'll be aware that Luke particularly emphasises the roles of key women in Jesus' life – and at his death. It's a theme that parallels his emphasis on the faith of Gentiles – non-Jews. The gospel is for everyone, regardless of sex or race, social status or disability.

Jesus treated women with respect and dignity, and valued the practical support of some well-off and well-connected women⁶. It is the women who go to Jesus' tomb who see the angels and are the first to tell of his resurrection.⁷

⁵ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK 2001)

⁶ See, for example, Luke 8:2-3

⁷ Luke 24:1-10

Lessons for us

In today's story, Jesus does not undervalue Martha's work in preparing a meal for him and his disciples. He is sorry to see her so hot and bothered. But he doesn't want anything to get in the way of Mary growing in her discipleship. Mary won't have many opportunities to spend time with Jesus, listening to him and enjoying his company. She is so determined to be with him that all else seems unimportant. Can you imagine how Mary would have felt if she'd read the passage we heard earlier from Paul's letter to the Colossians, and realised that the man sitting in front of her was the eternal Son of God, through whom the universe was created, and through whom God chose to reconcile all things to himself through his blood shed on the Cross?

What about us? How much do we appreciate opportunities to spend time with Jesus? Our culture tells us that being busy is good. Achievement brings fulfilment. Hard work brings success and prosperity.

Yes, meals have to be cooked, washing has to be done, DIY tasks need to be completed. Money has to be earned, children have to be looked after, holidays have to be paid for.

But what priority do we give to nurturing our relationship with Jesus? Are we keen to spend time with him in prayer and worship, to learn about him and from him in the Bible? Are we really in danger of being "so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good"? Or is it more likely that we're too busy doing lots of important and useful things to spend time

in prayer, worship and studying the Bible, and we miss opportunities to grow in our relationship with Jesus?