

Sunday between 17th and 23rd July [16]

Luke 10:38-42

Our gospel today is about the story of two sisters, Martha and Mary. It all takes place in the village of Bethany which is located just outside of Jerusalem. From what we can glean from this passage and in John chapters 11 and 12, Martha lived with her sister Mary and their later to be famous brother Lazarus. Here in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus Jesus and his disciples sit down for some relaxation away from the press of the crowds. Here is a home that Jesus had been many times, a place that he knew he was loved and accepted. Both sisters are delighted to see Jesus but they express their enthusiasm in very different ways.

People have varying temperaments; some are active always needing to be busy, never able to sit still. Others are thoughtful, willing to sit back and think things through. Martha is a very activity-oriented person; her sister appeared to be of the more thoughtful nature. Historically we have many times wrongly contrasted Martha and Mary, as though each Christian should make a choice to either be a worker like Martha or a worshipper like Mary. But in so doing we miss the point, surely each of us would be at our best if we were to imitate Mary in our worship and Martha in our work, and to achieve balance in both.

Mary is content to sit at Jesus' feet soaking up the Word, and not "do" anything. But Martha was looking around at all the guest and sees the need to prepare a meal. Martha was obviously a great hostess; she got up and began to prepare food for Jesus and all those there with Him. Martha looked and said to herself "What privilege to prepare a meal for the Master!" Mary on the other hand would have said, "What a privilege to sit at the feet of the Master." Is one right and the other wrong? Not at all, duty and devotion are both necessary but there must be a balance. Every action, every relationship, every institution has a basic focus, which is its reason for existence if it hopes to succeed; if loses that focus it will fail. When you lose your focus, then you are in trouble. Look at what happened to Martha.

First, a loss of focus caused Martha to resort to self-pity. Many of us understand what entertaining unplanned visitors is like and why Martha is flustered and feeling more and more frustrated with each passing moment. Martha is described as being distracted, the implication being that Martha wanted to hear Jesus herself, she wanted to be seated at his feet too, but she was pulled away by her sense of her "duties." Fretting about the meal has robbed her of any joy of her service to the Lord. The problem did not lie in the work that Martha was doing, it was the attitude that she was doing it with that became the problem. Martha's problem was one of balance, between the going and doing and the sitting and listening.

Then a loss of focus causes Martha to become angry at others. Our world is full of distractions. And the more the pressure, the most tempting it is to focus on the urgent rather than the essential. There is no doubt in this encounter that Martha wanted to honour Jesus. She began her work with the right attitude, one of loving hospitality, but in the busyness she began to lose focus. We have many of us begun the task of preparing a huge festive meal (like Christmas dinner) with the greatest of enthusiasm, but as time passed we came to realize that we are running out of time and we cannot possibly finish everything that we planned to do. When that happens, we get angry – angry at ourselves for letting ourselves get to this point and angry with anyone else who might have made a difference in accomplishing your goals. Martha was like that, the harder she worked the more worked up she became. It is bad enough to have everything to do, it is even worse when we can think of someone who we do not feel is pulling their weight and who has let us down. That is what seems to be happening to Martha.

Finally a loss of focus causes Martha to find fault with others. In the second part of verse forty, Martha exploded and she comes boiling out of the kitchen, red-faced and furious and says; "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

She doesn't even call her sister by name. In her defence perhaps she had already done everything she could think of to attract Mary's attention and signal her that she needed help. We all have ways that we use to get a message across. We clear our throats. We make attention-getting motions. We have a situation in this text where Martha cannot get Mary's attention. We are even more irritated when the other person ignores us. Mary was willing to face Martha's anger, because sitting at the feet of Jesus means everything to her at this point. No one can force us to be devoted, it is a voluntary decision. But Martha also finds fault in Jesus. Whatever she had already done to get Mary's attention, she is totally exasperated and speaks directly to Jesus. There is an accusation in her voice when she says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

Martha was angry at Mary for being so selfish and she is angry at Jesus for allowing this to go on. Notice that Martha addressed her irritation to Jesus, you have to admit that she is a formidable woman. Martha is accusing Jesus of not caring for her, because she was sure that if Jesus really cared for her He would tell Mary to get up and help her. In saying this she not only rebuked her sister but also the one for whom all of these preparations are being made. Whenever our service causes us to criticise others and pity ourselves because we feel overworked, we had better take time to examine our lives!

The core of Martha's problem is that she tried to impose her value system on Mary. Note that Jesus did not tell Martha to do what Mary was doing. It was Martha's attitude that needed correction, but Martha's work was both good and necessary. The reality is that as believers today we need to cultivate both the Martha and the Mary in each of us.

The biggest risk in saying that is that is that someone out there who is doing nothing will gratefully say "Amen" to what they think has just been said, and so excuse themselves from doing anything except 'sitting'. The truth is that there are lots of 'sitters' in the world. The difference between Martha and Mary is not that one served and the other did not, but rather their serving took different forms and for a time one served out of duty and the other out of devotion.

Martha came to Jesus because she wanted him to lighten load that day. He did what she wanted but not in the way that she had expected. He lightened her load not by having Mary help her but by giving her a new perspective on her work. When we forget why we are doing what we are doing we can get turned upside down, and we may end up feeling overworked and unappreciated. It was once said "If we forget God while serving God we will probably quit God!" When we keep our attitude right we find that God will enable us to do what needs to be done with joy and satisfaction. Unless we take time to spend time with Jesus personally and privately, we will soon end up like Martha busy but not blessed.

Martha was not wrong nor was Mary. It is case of where one did well and the other better. The Christian life is learning to balance duty and devotion. Sitting without serving is powerless. Serving without sitting is directionless. Serving after sitting produces power and balance. Ministry will take many forms and we are all richly blessed when we both offer and receive ministry in our journey. So let us each worry not about whether we are more like Martha or Mary, but rather work towards being like the best of them both in our attitudes and our actions.