

## **Sisters – Doing Things Differently (Martha & Mary)**

### **Passage: Luke 10:38-42**

Sisters – who here has a sister?

I have two of them

And I'm the youngest

so they've always been there, they've always been a part of my life

Although there have been times when I would gladly have been without them

Daaad .... Do you know what Ruth just did

Muuuum ..... it's Ruth's turn to do the washing up not mine

Was that just my family?

We're sisters who are fairly close in age,

we grew up in the same family, in the same place, with the same experiences,

We may look a little alike, we may sound alike

But we're very different

Not better or worse, not right or wrong, just different

And as a result we do things differently.

And that's what we have in this story

Two Sisters, doing things differently.

And it's not just the case in this encounter,

it's the case each time we come across Martha and Mary

We meet them three times in the Gospels:

Once here

Once in John Chapter 11 when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead – Lazarus was their brother

And then again in John Chapter 12 when Jesus is sharing a meal with friends and Mary anoints his feet with oil.

And interestingly their behaviours are quite consistent in each of these three stories:

Martha is the hospitable one, concerned for the comfort of her guests,

the practical one, taking care of the details

- In this passage – she opens her home, she’s concerned about all the preparations for her guests
- In the passage about Lazarus being raised from the dead, she’s concerned about the bad odour if they open the grave
- In the passage where Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, there are only two words that tell us Martha was there – “Martha Served”

And then Mary

Well, Mary can be found in exactly the same place in all three instances:

- In this story she sat at Jesus’ feet, listening
- In the passage about Lazarus, we hear: *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet*
- And in the third incident we hear, *Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair.*

Mary is always at his feet

So what are we to make of the roles these two women take each time they meet Jesus?

One of the things I find interesting about today’s passage is where it occurs in Luke’s gospel

Let’s be honest, he could have put this event pretty much anywhere between say chapter 6 and chapter 20

and it would have fitted in quite happily as a stand-alone little account.

But Luke places this right after the parable of the Good Samaritan

and right before Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray,

when we hear the Lord's Prayer for the very first time.

I don't think this placement is by chance,

Because we know that the bible is the word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

So there's nothing random about any of the bible

This is where, in Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit wanted this event to be recorded

So what is it that ties these three passages together –

the Good Samaritan, the story of Martha and Mary and the Lord's Prayer?

Well we only have to go back a page or so to find out

Look back with me at vs 25 – 28 in this chapter:

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

*He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"*

*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

And this is exactly the example we have each time we come across Martha and Mary

Martha is concerned with loving her neighbour – with serving others, with taking care of their needs.

Mary is at Jesus' feet, focused on getting to know him, on building her relationship with him

Humbly listening, worshipping, adoring, - a beautiful picture of how we should pray.

How wonderfully this little scene draws together those two incredible aspects of Jesus' teaching

– one sister serving her neighbours and one sister loving her Lord.

But I'm sure that many of us are a little conflicted by this particular story of Martha & Mary,

Because we empathise with Martha

She's doing a good thing; she's working hard; she's serving others,

And yet by the end of this short passage we can't help but come away thinking Martha has got it wrong

But has she?

Well, I think yes and no!

Martha is doing all the sorts of things we're encouraged to do to love our neighbours

She throws her home open to welcome others in

She's generous in feeding what would probably have been a large group of people travelling with Jesus

She's happy to serve.

And in all this we shouldn't be in any doubt that she loves Jesus just as much as Mary does.

Many of us here today are wonderful Martha's ,..... yes the men too.

We express our love and commitment through the "doing" part of our Christian lives

- Being on church rosters
- Going out to John's Landing
- Teaching children about Jesus
- Looking after friends and neighbours
- The list goes on

We serve others as Martha was serving her guests.

And Jesus doesn't criticise Martha for what she does. He knows and values her servant heart.

But he does gently chide her and I think there are a couple of things behind this.

First of all she's having a bit of a whinge isn't she

The critical tongue, the public complaint about her sister not pulling her weight

And so there's a subtle change in her heart – away from that attitude of putting others first,

Martha's focus is now on Mary's behaviour

but she's not in any way thinking of Mary's needs, she's thinking of herself;

and in a matter of minutes her beautiful servant heart has turned a little sour.

She's become critical and judgmental.

And again I can empathise with Martha

I'm ashamed of the number of times I'm about the Lord's work,

sometimes even right here in church

And I'm whinging, usually to myself, but sometimes out loud,

about what others are or aren't doing;

Putting **myself** and **my** needs before others;

Showing those same traits of criticism and judgment.

Am I the only one?

But this isn't the only reason that Jesus admonishes Martha

He chides her for being "worried and upset about many things"

She's fussing with the details

She's distracted and needlessly worried,

perhaps by trying to be too elaborate with her hospitality.

Now, think about the last time you had people over for a meal

The energy and effort put into making the house spotless, laying the perfect table,

hours spent cooking beautiful food.

Then think about the last time you went to someone's house for a meal.

What do you remember?

Well, possibly the food.

But more likely you remember the conversation, the laughter,  
the joy of being together, getting to know one another better.

Martha has lost sight of the most important aspect of hospitality – the guests

Are these really the things to worry about when you could instead be spending time with Jesus?

But **we** do it as well, don't we.

I know that when I was working I had a great excuse of being too busy.

But even now, when I'm retired, my diary is still filled with stuff

Gym class

Choir practice

Parish Council

Wardens meetings

Doctors appointments...

Coffee with Fiona or Jo or my neighbours or in fact anyone

But isn't it amazing

No-where in my diary is a regular appointment of "coffee with Jesus"

I haven't prioritised prayer and bible reading anywhere in my day,

I fit it in around all my other stuff.

And so, of course, there are some days I just don't manage to fit it in at all.

But even when we do make time, what about all the distractions?

For example, I'm sure that many of you this morning are on one of the rosters that make church services happen

And that's wonderful

It's an important part of how we worship – serving others and serving our Lord

But is this always how we think of it

Or do we get so caught up in the doing that we lose sight of why we're doing it

Or we're so busy on the details of doing

That worship, bible teaching, prayer, pass by without us, even when we're sat right here in church

For many people, Sunday is really the only day where spending time with Jesus is given priority

So we need to help each other with these sorts of distractions

By sharing the load

So that being on a roster is only a very occasional source for distraction

and not an every week thing.

Our responsibilities at church, just like time spent with our family and friends or in our work may be important,

But they are not the most important thing

Yet, just like Martha, we allow them to distract us from what is better.

So, what about Mary

Well, Mary is bucking the trend in all sorts of ways.

For a start she's abandoned her post and has left everything to her sister.

And not only is she **not** doing what was expected of her,

She's actually doing what only men were expected to do,

She was listening to the teachings of a Rabbi.

And even worse .... she isn't sat unobtrusively at the back

She's front and centre, right at Jesus' feet.

In fact she was taking quite a risk in behaving like this –

behaving in a way that the men of the day would have seen as completely unacceptable

Because she's behaving exactly as if **she** is one of Jesus' disciples,

Sitting at his feet, being taught by him.

She could have been treated quite harshly and roughly for doing this.

I can just imagine Martha fuming about this:

"Not only has she left me to do all the work,

but she's behaving outrageously, making a complete spectacle of herself;

Jesus, tell her off will you!"

But no ..... Look at the way Jesus responds.

He's gentle with Martha but quite firm

He has no problem with what Mary is doing,

In fact he's totally supportive of what she's doing.

Because Jesus knows Mary's greatest need

Her greatest need is for Jesus.

She has chosen what is better..... She has chosen Jesus.

And as a result, knowing and loving him will be her joy eternally,

never to be taken away from her.

So, has Mary got it right and Martha got it wrong

Well, of course the answer is no,

This isn't a question of getting it right or getting it wrong.

This is a question of something good and something better.

Much of Luke's Gospel tells us about what being a disciple of Jesus means.

And loving and serving our neighbours is a key aspect of discipleship.

But there is an order of priority

The two commandments quoted earlier in this chapter come originally from the ten commandments God gave to Moses

And the very first of these is

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*

This is what Mary was doing when she chose to sit at Jesus' feet.

She knew that to truly love him she needed to listen to him, to know him, to know what was important to him, and to know what he wanted of her.

So she put this as her number one priority.

She sat at his feet, listening.

You can picture her can't you;

sat in submission, totally focused on him, hanging on his every word.

She shut out all distractions,

She put aside all other demands on her time,

She ignored all the expectations of what she should be doing,

She focused entirely on Jesus.

But why?

What is it about Jesus that drew Mary to behave so radically, as to sit at his feet as a disciple?

What is it about him that caused Martha on the one hand to throw her home open to him,

And on the other hand still feel she could whinge to him about Mary?

What is it about him that made them both reach out to him when their brother was dying?

What is it about him that drew Mary to anoint his feet?

I think that through these three encounters that Martha and Mary have with Jesus,

We can trace their growing love for him,

Their growing dependence on him,

And their growing recognition of who he really is,

Their Lord and their Saviour, the promised Messiah.

And as we come to know Jesus

Our love for him grows,

Our certainty in him is strengthened

And we're better able to deal with the hard things life throws our way

Because we can put our trust in him.

He is **our** Lord and Saviour too.

And when we truly believe this,

We can find that inner peace and joy that come from knowing and loving Jesus.

So, how **do** we come to know Jesus?

To know him in that same very personal way that Martha and Mary knew him?

Well by inviting him in just, as Martha did.

And then by sitting at his feet and listening, as Mary did,

Listening through reading about him and learning about how to be one of his disciples.

Here, in this very short passage,

We have two women modelling Jesus' teaching on what it takes to be a disciple

Loving God and serving our neighbours

And we know that this discipleship was brought together perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ

Who was the ultimate model for loving your neighbour,

When he died on the cross for us.

In response nothing, not even our service to others as part of our Christian life is as important as spending time with him.

Jesus told Martha that there was only one thing that was needed.

It's the same thing we all need

Jesus

Nothing is more important than inviting him in and sitting at his feet and listening.

### **Let me pray**

Father, you know there is more of Martha's busyness in us than we care to admit.

We respect her ability to serve others, to get things done, to take care of the little tasks.

Yet, sometimes we forget about the better thing that was Mary's total focus.

Sometimes, we just need to spend time at Jesus' feet ourselves, listening and learning and loving.

Help us to put you first, God. Help us to find our own version of quiet time with you each day,

to know you better, to see the world as you see it, to love as you love, to forgive as you forgive,

to be your disciples in this world.

In Jesus we pray, amen.