

Sermon: 'Moaning Martha or Maddening Mary?'

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LESSON: Luke 10:38-42

Every now and again I get an email questionnaire from one of the opinion poll people, I won't say which one in case I get sued!

In the poll I am invited to answer questions about all manner of different things,

some of which I know a fair bit about,
but most of which I know nothing about at all.

Some weeks afterwards on the news I will hear what the latest poll says about something,

and I think to myself,

"That was me!"

and I wonder if all the others who responded about that subject were as

ignorant about it as I was!

Well this morning I am going to conduct an opinion poll, and each of you here in the congregation has been chosen to participate.

The question is about the bible passage you have just heard,

the story of Jesus going to the house of Mary and Martha,

and the question I want to ask is this,

how many of you have sympathy with Martha,

and how many think that Mary was more on the right line?

Well I think that in most churches there would be that division, and also that most Christians fall roughly into one category or the other.

There is the occasional super hero who is the best of both,

Mary and Martha rolled into one dynamic spiritual bundle,

but most of us more ordinary folk fall one way or the other.

When I was a very young minister in the very first year of my very first appointment the Methodist Conference came to our Church,

the Eastbrook Hall in Bradford,

a Church whose Great Hall was almost the mirror of this one.

The problem was that to be honest the whole Church was a little bit run down,

thus for this first year of my ministry I was involved as much with sorting

out the building as with getting on with the work of ministry I had just

spent four years in theological college training to do!

Once or twice a week we would have a massive working party;

we had wooden floors which were filthy,

but this was back in the dark ages and there were no fancy machines to clean

the floor as there are now,
so we were all in a row,
down on our knees,
scraping away the dirt inch by inch with knives.

I always remember that one night there was the Church prayer meeting going on,
and as one particularly bouncy and irritating member of the prayer meeting
came through he shouted out with great glee,
"Praise the Lord, it's good to see you all on your knees at last!"
Then he went on his way to the prayer meeting,
leaving a tide of muttering resentment behind him!

I wonder if that incident from some thirty three years ago rings any bells with this story of
Mary and Martha?

Perhaps your sympathy is with those of us on our knees scraping the floor?
Perhaps your sympathy is with Martha,
the practical housewife who was doing her very best to make Jesus welcome
but seemed to get little thanks for it?
Perhaps you even feel that she was spoken to by Jesus a little harshly!
Well let's look at this incident from the life of Jesus and try to learn from
it,
and I want us to look at two things about Martha,
then two things about Mary,
and then I want us to try and apply the lessons to ourselves so that
when
we go home for our lunch we will feel that we have learnt something
practical from the word of God!

First, Martha welcomes Jesus,
verse 38

verse 38

Remember that Jesus and his disciples were not welcome at all in many places.
Some resented what seemed to be an attack by Jesus on traditional religion.
Some resented his spiritual insight which cut right through them and made
them feel uncomfortable.

Some were fearful of being seen with him in case that got them in trouble
with the occupying Romans.

There were not too many homes which were open to a man like Jesus,
and Jesus loved to visit;

as we read in John's gospel chapter 11 and verse 5

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."

Jesus was delighted to be there in this welcoming home,
and the sisters were glad to see an old friend,

honoured by his presence,

dismayed by all the rumours going on about him,

but in their love and care wanting to offer Jesus their very best.

Can't you almost imagine Martha thinking,

"Poor Jesus, no woman to look after him,

no money for accommodation or food,

no pillow on which to lay his tired head for the night,

I'll give him a lovely few days,

I'll feed him the very best money can buy,

I'll give him a good square meal,
I'll leave him to lie down on the bed for a sleep,
I'll look after him!

Martha had a lovely heart and lovely motives,
she gave him a warm welcome and promised him a good meal,
but the trouble is that Martha was just a little bit of a busybody,
she welcomes the man of love to her shared home but then does not seem to
speak in a very loving way about her sister,
verse 40

verse 40

In short, my second point, Martha moans.

She comes out and moans at Jesus for letting Mary sit listening to him when he knows that there is a lot to be done.

He knows she is slaving away on her own in the kitchen,
he knows it will soon get dark and things need to be got ready fairly soon,
she moans at Jesus but of course the person she is really moaning at is well
within earshot,
she is really moaning at Mary!

You know the sort of thing.

The Mother calls in her children with the words,
"I'm surprised your Father let you play out in your best clothes!"

You know the sort of thing.

The Mother says to her married son,
"You really ought not to let the house get so untidy John."

You know the sort of thing because sometimes it has been directed at you,
a comment is made about something to another person in the room but you
are well aware of the fact that it is a criticism of you!

When we look at Martha in this story there is nothing wrong with her welcome,
there is nothing wrong with her hard work of preparation,
there is nothing wrong with her love and care for Jesus,
but there is everything wrong with her attitude.

And the reason that there is everything wrong in her attitude is that she
claims the right to decide where Mary ought to be,
what Mary ought to be doing,
when it was nothing to do with her!

More than that she transfers all this on to Jesus;
she tells Jesus that He ought to have the same attitude as she has,
and my but don't we all do that!

Those folk who come along to the prayer meeting can get really fed up that there are so few
of them and indignantly tell the Church that the prayer meeting should be everyone's number
one priority.

Those folk who are involved in action groups and pressure groups for this charity or that good
cause cannot understand how other Christians can just sit around and pray when there is so
much to be done!

I could pile example upon example but I am sure that you have got the message.
Martha did it,
I do it,
I suspect you do it,
we would much rather live in a world and a Church where everyone else
thinks just as we do,
for the way we think is so obviously right!

And we would much rather follow a Jesus who saw the faith as we do as well,
so how inconvenient it is that so often Jesus does not seem to always bless our
well thought out little plans and priorities.
As the poet Sidney Carter puts it,

"Catch the bird of heaven,
Lock him in a cage of gold;
Look again tomorrow,
But he will be gone.
Ah the bird of heaven,
Follow where the bird has gone,
Ah the bird of heaven,
Keep on travelling on."

We can never line up Jesus to rubber stamp our own thoughts and attitudes.
Rather you and I can only be the woman or the man we are and leave others
to be the woman or the man they are,
and leave Jesus to be the man He is,
the "Bird of Heaven" who we can never pin down.

Jesus needed what Martha offered,
He needed a good meal and a comfortable night's sleep.
He needed her care,
He needed her love and friendship,
but she had no right to complain about what her sister was offering,
and in fact she spoilt the lovely things she had to offer by her self-pity and
her self-concern.

As the Bible commentator C. B. Caird writes here,
good works done with this judgemental attitude become
"A misery to the doer and a tyranny to others."

What then about Mary?

Verse 39

verse 39

I can almost hear some of you thinking,
and dare I speculate that what you are thinking is this:-

"I'd like to be like Mary,
but I have two children to look after and get to and from school,
I've got the washing to do,
there are piles of ironing everywhere,

the house needs a good clean,
and I do not have the time to just sit around!"

"I'd like to be like Mary,
but I leave for work early and I am in such a pressurised job that I nearly
always stay late.
With this recession, if I don't I'll be the first for the chop when the
redundancies come and when I get do in I am so tired I fall asleep in front of
the television then crawl up to bed,
I do not have the time to just sit around!"

It is because so many of us feel like that that I never choose that hymn which has the verse
"The trivial round the common task,
would furnish all we ought to ask."
because in most people's experience it doesn't!

So many of us are like Martha,
especially in this great city of London with its crazy pace and busyness,
we live our lives on the run,
we are so flustered and stressed.

If we go by tube we elbow ourselves into the carriage rather than wait for the next one.
If we are in the car we swap from lane to lane to get there just a bit quicker.
If we are on a bike we don't bother too much about red traffic lights.
If we are on foot we grow so irritated by those tourists and dawdlers who get
in our way!

Because of all this and more we starve ourselves
of contemplation,
of stillness,
of quiet,
we are so involved in detail that we miss out on the big picture,
we forget what the psalmist told us in Psalm 46 that we are to,
"Be still, and know that I am God."

Mary sat and listened at the feet of Jesus.
Jesus Himself made time to be alone with His Heavenly Father,
making time for quiet,
for prayer,
for thought.

Scientists tell us that if we sit quiet for just ten minutes a day we lower our blood pressure
and live in better health,
and that's just being quiet,
I am sure that being quiet whilst being consciously held in the love of God is
even more beneficial to our health!
So do try to create some time each day just to sit quietly,
use that time for prayer,
for Bible reading,
for reading some devotional book or another,
and in that stillness you will come to know God so much better.

Then second, Mary listens to Jesus.
Remember what Jesus was about when we see him here,
He is on his way to Jerusalem,
on His way to suffering and to death,
and Mary must have sensed that and therefore realised that this might in
fact be the very last time she ever sat at the feet of Jesus,
no wonder she wasn't too fussed about helping in the kitchen,
she had her opportunity and she seized it!

Do you seize your opportunity to learn of Jesus?

Many folk say to me,
"I don't seem to grow in the Christian life,"
or
"God doesn't seem very real to me,"
or
"I can't find much guidance in my Christian life."

My question in response is always the same.
"Do you make time to be with God?
to listen to Jesus?
to open your life to the living and loving presence of the Holy Spirit?"

You may not be able to get into a quiet space but you can create a quiet space wherever you are.

Many Christians have their quiet time when commuting,
many young mums when the baby has an afternoon nap,
many workers by leaving for work just a little early and stopping off in a
park or a church on the way.
How you make that space doesn't matter,
but it does matter that you do,
for when you do you begin to grow as a Christian,
you begin to realise how the Bible speaks into your own situation,
you begin to understand that God cares for every detail of your life.

Moaning Martha, Maddening Mary,
Mary sitting, Martha dashing.
Mary seems to come out of it best in this encounter with Jesus,
but in fact if we look at the passage before this
verses 25 to 37 of this same chapter,
we have the story of the Good Samaritan,
there it is the doer who seems to get the divine nod,
and perhaps that flags up the truth that we do need both.

Mary sitting, Martha dashing,
and Jesus loved them both,
Jesus needed them both.
Service without worship eventually becomes empty of eternal value.
Worship without service is an abstract not rooted in reality.

The Christian life is about love for God and for neighbour,
we need to try to reflect that balance within our Church,

and try to hold that balance in our lives,
for there is a time to sit as Mary sat,
and there is a time to dash as Martha dashed.

But if others are dashing whilst we sit,
or others are sitting as we dash,
then we need to keep our mouths shut and our minds open to that challenging
truth that God needs all kinds of folk to accomplish His work,
and sometimes God can even use those who are different to you and different
to me.
Now isn't that just amazing!

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