

Martha and Mary

Luke 10 : 38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked " Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

"Martha, Martha" the Lord answered "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed- or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her,"

Why did Luke finish the story there, I would really like to know what each of them said and did after that, then I realised that it isn't about what they did but what we do after we hear the story.

I used think of this story as Martha, Mary and Jesus but as has been demonstrated by our young people in the vignette the opening words tell it is Jesus and his disciples arriving at Martha's house. It does not say how many disciples were with Jesus.

Three weeks ago Roly spoke about Jesus heading resolutely toward Jerusalem there was no mention of how many were with him, two weeks ago Julian spoke of Jesus sending out the 70 others, we can presume they have gone home after their missionary escapade. Therefore Jesus and his disciples could mean that 13 people turned up unannounced at Martha's house.

There are not many women in the gospels who are named. Martha and Mary obviously have an important role to play. What are the lessons which we can learn from them today. Martha opened her home. The text says it was her home. We can presume Mary lived there with her as other stories in the Bible have Martha and Mary together but they also have their brother Lazarus living with them as well. Why did Martha have a house? Was she a widow? Why was Mary not married and living elsewhere? There are more questions than answers. Does Mary always do less around the home than Martha, maybe she is a lot younger?

It appears that it wasn't the first time Jesus has visited Martha's house, they seem to have a relationship which is more relaxed than new. The text says Martha opened her home to him, this may have been past tense, Jesus could have been there often before. Bethany was just a short walk of about 3 km from Jerusalem up the Mount of Olives. The same distance as from here to the Oval. Some commentaries say that it may have been a home church home where people regularly met. What we do know is that when Lazarus died Jesus was most upset. All these factors point to a long term friendship rather than a one off visit.

Let's have a look at Martha. Martha is an active person needing to be busy and doing or seen to be busy. I used to say give me a clip board and I can look busy all day without ever doing anything. Today a clipboard is out of fashion, it needs to be an electronic device. I work with people who are so busy they haven't got time to do the most important things. Prioritising is not a skill they possess. When I try to ascertain exactly what they have done it's really difficult. They can't tell me either but will say they didn't have enough time to complete the high priority tasks because they have been

too busy. These are the kind of people who can't finish in eight hours employment as they should be able to do in five hours.

Back to our script. Martha was in the kitchen cooking for a number of people, she was distracted by the preparations, not just getting the meal ready. She was distracted by the preparations. Martha was a very hospitable hostess which was a social requirement at this time in their culture. Martha had a strong desire to do everything exactly right. She wished to please, to serve, to do the right thing. This often succeeds in making everyone else around that person feel most uncomfortable if it is not done in a quiet unassuming manner.

Perhaps the fear of shame of not living up to the cultural norm reinforced her behaviour so that she did everything possible to make sure this didn't happen and that everything was perfect. We do know she was too busy to enjoy her guests.

Many older brothers and sisters have an irritating tendency to take charge, a habit developed while growing up. This is not so much a habit that they develop on their own but one that was thrust onto them by their parents. I am pretty sure that I did it to my children and I definitely hear it being said to my grandchildren. "You have to look after your little brother/ sister". "Make sure he /she doesn't pick up those little toys and put them in his / her mouth." We can easily see this trait in Martha as the older sister of Mary and Lazarus.

It may have been possible to listen to what was being said while preparing the meal, a bit like open plan living rooms today where you can be part of the group while working in the kitchen. It is more likely that the cooking was done in a separate building due to the fire regulations of the time. Unlike today's kitchen there would not have been a fridge filled with prepared meals or at least a packet of mince ready to be defrosted in the microwave. It doesn't seem as though visitors were expected otherwise Martha, as the hospitable hostess, would have food and the house prepared and ready before the guests arrived.

I am lucky enough to have three sisters. When growing up and living together at home we each had jobs to do to have the house and meal ready for whoever would get invited to our place for lunch after church. It could have been visitors to church, medical students which we had in the church for a number of years or church members if no one else was around needing a meal. Being older I seemed to get more jobs. I remember how grateful I was when we got wall to wall carpet and I no longer needed to dust and polish the floor boards along each side of the strip mat up the hallway.

I would be cranky too if I was doing all the preparation while my younger sister sat doing nothing to help me. I am on Martha's team thinking that Mary is lazy and lacks any consideration and cooperation for all work to be done to feed this crowd. Surely two lots of hands are quicker than one. Maybe Martha had had enough and thought she could get Jesus to tell Mary to be more helpful. Although I don't think I could do what Martha did to resolve this issue. I can't imagine asking a guest to tell my sister to help me. We can see that Martha was frustrated, over whelmed, couldn't cope, at the end of her tether.

Martha said "Don't you care. Tell her to help." which is a classic way of blame shifting. Jesus wasn't responsible for the division of labour in the house. Whose responsibility was it to tell her sister to

help with the preparations? I can't see a time when it would be the guest's job to tell the home owners what to do. Maybe I am not on Martha's team after all.

What Martha needed was a change in the way she acted, therefore she needed a change in the way she thought. She worried about many things. The problem with worry is that it takes over. Things that may or may not happen become huge so you can no longer deal rationally with the things at hand that do need your attention. Even while we are worrying we do not know what needs our priority, to worry about first.

When Ethan was at day care he learned to say "For Pete's sake" when things weren't going to plan. When things were worse than that he said "For the Pete's sake of it." I can imagine that Martha would have appreciated Ethan's terminology and can hear her say "For the Pete's sake of it. Jesus don't you care".

I liked a message on the message board outside a church in Nambour on the Sunshine Coast which read "Your temper is a valuable possession, don't lose it." Even better to learn not to lose your temper when talking to Jesus.

Once Martha had asked Jesus to help she got more than she was bargained for. Did she honestly hope that Jesus would say something like "Okay, let's get the meal done first and we can all chat over a cup of tea." Or perhaps "Sorry Martha I shouldn't have been so rude as to keep Mary here when there was so much work to be done"

"Martha, Martha" the Lord answered "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed- or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her,"

Martha is trying to have everything perfect and she is told that she is worrying and upset about many things. Only a few things are needed indeed only one. Then the last nail in Martha coffin, Mary has chosen what is better. Martha would have been devastated, not only has Mary chosen what is better but it will not be taken away from her. It was probably just as well that the pot of stew was in the out building otherwise Martha may let Jesus have it without serving it. This doesn't sound fair when we read these words in one of the newer versions of the Bible but shortly we will examine this further.

We can be so busy and worried that we cannot see Jesus sitting with us wanting to share with us. We need to stop to spend time quietly without the worry clouding our perspective and blotting out the voice of Jesus.

I like to think that they lived happily ever after, although we do need to look at what Jesus was saying to Martha and what Mary had already learnt.

In verse 42, the passage more literally reads, "Mary has chosen the better portion, or better gift." The word used here is also found in the Old Testament but it has three different meanings. In Number 18, the Lord said to Aaron, who was the first high priest, This is a most holy offering and Do not treat the holy offerings as common.

Firstly in verse 8 “Portion” is the Lord’s gift to his servants. It’s the term He used to describe His provision for the priests. He then goes on to describe how He will provide their food and all that they need to live. They needed this because they had no land and no means to provide for themselves or their families. God promises to meet their needs through that “portion.” So firstly it is a gift from God.

The second meaning of “Portion” is found in verse 28 where it describes our gift to the Lord. It is the sacrifice that He calls us to make to Him and what He requires of us. It is the tithe which is the Lord’s portion of our income.

Thirdly “Portion” is also used to refer to our Lord Himself as our portion. In Lamentations 3. 22-24 it says “ It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion; therefore I will hope in Him.”

This portion is therefore our hope which is pointing to Jesus himself who became the sacrifice offered to the Father on our behalf. He became our portion. We need to recognise Jesus is the gift as well as the giver. There is nothing more important than spending time with Jesus.

Mary seemed to understand this better than most. In fact, every time we hear of her in the Bible she is at Jesus’ feet. There’s our passage here then John 11:32 concerning her brother Lazarus’ death, and again in John 12:3 where she pours perfume on Jesus feet. Here is a woman who loved Jesus. Mary knew that Jesus had something to offer her, and she wanted that portion. She also knew that He wanted something from her. The portion she chose to give Him wasn’t her business, but her adoration, not her work but her worship. I want to be on Mary’s team. And most importantly she knew that Jesus Himself was her portion. He was her food source and she chose to go to Him for life. Jesus is to be our portion. Business and worry tend to raise our energy level and propel us, but we are to be energized by the Lord. He is to be the food for our souls. When we are too busy to go to Jesus for the food and nourishment for our soul, other things provide that motivational food. Our souls then become undernourished or even sick resulting in a loss of perspective and we lose our way in life.

What Jesus is telling Martha and by extension, each of us as well is that she’s going to the wrong food source. She needs to taste, instead, of the Lord. Psalm 73 verse 26 says *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of our heart and our portion forever.* Martha’s strength is that she gets things accomplished. She can rustle up a meal for ten to fifteen people. She’s also probably very competent and extremely proactive. The flip side of having these strengths is the weakness and liability of not relying on God. This can be seen as, or lead to, a lack of trust in God or the inability to stop, wait, and listen to the Lord. If you are like Martha and are very competent in getting things done, Jesus is saying to you take time out to communicate with me. Let me be your portion.

Martha had a few issues like she expected others to agree with her priorities; she was overly concerned with details; she tended to feel sorry for herself when her efforts were not recognised. She limited Jesus power in her life. Martha also showed a side of herself where she became frustrated, over whelmed, couldn’t cope, at the end of her tether. She lost direction and wasn’t able to make sound decisions nor put the meal on the table without help. Martha’s response here is fairly typical of a person who is ensnared in worry and business. No one likes to be in this state where you cannot see the trees for the forest or even the mountains for the clouds.

The usual tendency is that we often look for someone or something to blame when the blame is actually ours. It is difficult to take the blame for things in our lives when all is not going well. It is much easier to shift the blame to someone or something else. We need to take the responsibility of our part in proceedings and listen to Jesus before blaming someone else. If this is your usual modus operandi, way of operating Jesus says to you I am your portion. Stop and spend time with me.

Martha, in her state of worry, is convinced of the over-importance of many things. The bible story doesn't tell us exactly what it was but we do know that she was distracted by all the preparations. She could have been worried about the cleanliness of the house, was she worried if there was enough food to feed them all, or even what to have, was there enough water or did she have to go to the well, did the table need to be set or with this number was it a buffet? There could well have been a lot of preparation for Martha to take care of for her guests.

Jesus tells her that only one thing is truly critical, and that is spending time with Him. If you are someone who puts too much importance on things then Jesus is telling you also to spend more time with him. He is your portion, he is most important. When we do not use Jesus as our portion we find alternative energy source, relationships, focus and motivation or worry to fill our day.

No matter if we are very competent, stressed to the max or place too much importance on things, Jesus is our portion. We need to spend time with him as he is to be our primary food source. We need to realise that time with Him is indispensable for our spiritual, emotional and physical health.

Another lesson we need to learn is what we do with our concerns. Jesus teaches that we are to bring to God all of the things that are of concern to us, and entrust them to His care. You need to return next week when David Anderson will speak to us about this.

I am thankful that a ministry of hospitality is alive and well in this community. We are to continue with this valuable ministry remembering Jesus is our portion and he is the reason for our actions.

Jesus told Martha that Mary chose the better way and it will not be taken away. We need to forget worry and prioritise work and worship. There is a proper time to listen quietly to Jesus and a proper time to work for him. Getting caught up in details can make us forget the main reasons for our actions. Jesus is our portion, the gift and the giver.

Only one thing is needed Psalm 27:4 tells us *"This one thing I want from God, the thing I seek most of all, is the privilege of meditating in his Temple, living in his presence every day of my life, delighting in his incomparable perfections and glory."*