

MARTHA AND MARY

Pay full attention to the Word of God

Luke 10.38-42

Introduction

I did not want to preach on this text this morning. It is fraught with difficulties: So all the other texts looked much more appealing.

The story has fueled divisiveness and resentment, pitting women with different vocations in the church, in the Spirit, against each other.

It is all too easy to see this vignette as a contrast between active and contemplative spirituality. We love our little either/or. It makes life so much easier. We can pick one for use and excoriate the other. You know, doing is my thing; these effete people who sit around and talk in their ivory towers don't know anything. And vice versa.

But then is not now and we will never understand this little interaction without a little insight into then and also the tensions that Jesus created even among his friends.

Context in culture

Although the Hebrew Scriptures contain heroic stories of Ruth, Deborah, Jael and Esther by Jesus' time centuries later, under the influence of Greek thought Jewish writers took a dim view of

women. Jesus ben Sira wrote a wisdom book between 200 BCE and 183BCE that was highly valued in the educational institutions in Jesus' world and its influence carried on for many centuries. You can find it in any Apocrypha attached to an NRSV.

As I read his work I felt revulsion at what he had to say about women, more especially wives and daughters. Through this work the supposed degraded nature of women was taught in the places of higher education in Jesus' world and practical advice given as to how to keep them in their place.

Context in Luke

And so think about what Luke says about Jesus.

Luke has already reported (in 8.1-3) that Jesus was going about preaching in the villages and the twelve were with him. But he adds that there were also some women in the group who provided for them out of their means. If anything was reviled in the Wisdom of ben Sira it was letting a woman support you.

In other words Jesus is travelling through Galilee with a band of men and women who are naturally known to be his disciples. The remark implies that the group was spending night after night in strange villages. And the women were paying. These are women of independent means who put their reputations at stake for the sake of the kingdom. It is very hard to imagine ourselves into this.

Further, we might safely assume that some of these women were part of the mission of the seventy-two that forms the context for this whole journey to Jerusalem.

And now in this story he accepts the hospitality of two women, one of whom is wealthy enough to own her home.

Jesus is going on his way to Jerusalem and teaching his disciples on the way and this little story, set in a domestic context, is part of that building up of what it meant to be a disciple. Jesus needs hospitality and Martha welcomes him into her home. In that action she illustrates the discipleship of hospitality that Jesus encourages in his mission charge.

This short story stands in a complementary relationship with the parable of the Good Samaritan that precedes it and there is a tension between the two. The Good Samaritan illustrates what loving the neighbour means while this story places that in tension with the commitment to love God in the person of God's Word.

It also heightens the tension between the theme of rejection and hostility (the lawyer who posed the question of the neighbour to Jesus) and acceptance, Martha and Mary.

And like the Good Samaritan it is a story about the tension created in the breaking of social and cultural boundaries.

Mary, the disciple, teacher, missionary

Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet (in the public room with the men) and not being in the kitchen (the domain of the women and hidden from the men), is acting like a male disciple and probably bringing shame upon herself and her house. Jesus allows Mary to claim the same role as a male disciple. To sit at the feet of a rabbi was to learn from and then become a disciple of the rabbi. Mary was learning to be a rabbi in the school of Rabbi Jesus.

She, like the apostles later (Acts 6.1-6), leaves the serving of tables to others so as not to leave the ministry of the Word of God. Mary is here both disciple and apostle. Jesus breaks all the rules, all the stereotypes and all the boundaries as in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus will not take away from Mary her status as a disciple/learner who receives his teaching gladly. She has received the prophet and his word.

Martha, constrained by the fear custom creates

Martha is doing a good thing, being a neighbour, but her distractions and preoccupations mean that she may miss the word (8.14-15 and 4.4). Martha had too much to do and not much help. Luke regards this as a fact, a given, and not some neurotic obsession on her part.

What she says is true. But her situation makes her irritated so much so that Luke describes her as putting herself in an uproar.

Distractions pummel her on all sides and she cannot escape them.

I don't think that it was solely about the kitchen, either. There were other issues here and I have alluded to them already. Her sister Mary, for whom she seems to have been responsible, is joining a band of wandering women among a band of wandering men. What will happen to her? What will our friends and neighbours say? There is enough scandal already. Will someone marry her after this after this is all over?

Kitchen and culture combined in a maelstrom of distraction that waged battle in heart and mind. I think that it helps explain her extraordinary actions.

She accuses her sister of abandoning her to do all the work and asks a third party to intervene in a family rivalry. Such an approach breaks the bond of hospitality and creates tension; whose side are you on, Lord? Are you with me against my sister?

Martha's request, dominated by duty and the cares associated with it, brings a huge sigh of great sadness from Jesus. She is not doing something wrong, evil or bad. She is simply overwhelmed by what she sees as her responsibilities and her mind loses its focus. Jesus

reminds her of the 'one thing' necessary; to pay attention to the guest, everything else is optional.

Why is that so?

Jesus and the coming of the kingdom

Jesus' presence as a guest in Martha's house signals the coming of the kingdom of peace to this house. In Jesus' life there is urgency about this as he treads his way to Jerusalem. Remember in Luke he has his face set towards Jerusalem announcing that the kingdom has come near and that nothing must distract from this reality. There is no time to bury the dead, to say long family good byes and no looking back.

In ordinary times Martha's hospitality would be exceptional and acknowledged as such. But these are extraordinary times in the life of Jesus and the coming of the kingdom and Martha's concerns become one of the distractions to discipleship that Jesus has warned about.

I think it can be like going on a family holiday with children and we need to leave at a certain time to catch a flight. One of the children decides that he cannot take the bear but must take the dog. Then he wants to take both. Then he can't find the dog but decides it really has to be the cat. And in the background is the urgency of getting to the airport for check-in on time. The urgency finally drives the parent to

make a decision she might not have to make in another situation.
Tension explodes.

Mary has made the best decision in these urgent circumstances.

Conclusion

Perhaps the reading from Amos 800 years before Jesus captures something of the prophetic urgency that drove Jesus but does not drive us, at least to the same extent. Seeing the crumbling of the northern kingdom Israel before his eyes Amos cries out in frustration and anguish,

¹¹ The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.

¹² They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it.

Martin Luther wrote,

“This is the last blow. It is the worst, the most wretched of all.
All the rest of the blows would be bearable, but this is
absolutely horrible. He is threatening to take away the genuine

prophets and the true Word of God, so that there is no-one to preach even if men were most eager to wish to hear the Word and would run here and there to hear it.” (Martin Luther)

This is not story pitting people against each other or denigrating domestic life. It is about where we will put our priorities, to be aware that good things, noble things may distract us from paying attention to the Word of God among us.

Learning to pay attention to the kingdom of peace among us in the maelstrom of distraction is the point. We need a whole new spirituality.