

**Sermon on February 18th 2007, Estomihi
HIW annex Petrichurch 11.30 am**

Text: Luke 10, 38 – 42

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What do you think about the story about Martha and Mary that we have just heard? There is hardly a story in the New Testament which is as well-known and at the same time as controversial as this little incident. You get involved in it right away. Isn't it more than understandable that Martha urges her sister Mary to help her? Why on earth should she, Martha, slave away doing the housework, preparing the meal, setting the table, serving food and drinks, clearing the table, washing up – never ending chores, while this lady, her sister, is sitting there idly, doing absolutely nothing. Typical of her sister. She has always pretended to be something better and higher. Now she has chosen to listen attentively to the master's words, big deal!

What is Jesus' answer? It seems to be the typical answer of a man who enjoys having a woman wait on him hand and foot. "Mary has chosen the right thing", he says. Most translations even suggest: "Mary has chosen what is better" – the original Greek version is not quite clear on this. No matter which translation is the correct one, isn't Martha right thinking: Without me nothing would get done. Or does Martha secretly desire to relax, to listen or to take part in the conversation – or would she not be able to do so any more? Has she forgotten how to pause? Or is it the other way around? Has Mary forgotten how to pull herself together and give her sister a hand? To sit, to listen, to talk – isn't there more to life than that?

I presume most of us are somewhat similar to either Martha or Mary or know somebody who is like Martha or like Mary. Let us take a moment and silently reflect on that.

Well, how about yourself? Are you like Martha?

Marthas, women and men, that is people who slave away and work really hard. They have hardly time to take a breath. Marthas are people who simply see that certain things have got to be done. They knuckle down to it, but they may get restless if they are asked to sit down and rest for a while. There is always something needing to be seen to in the family or at work, isn't there? And whenever a cry for help is heard Marthas respond with activity. Let's get down to business!

Or are you more of a Mary?

Marys, women and men, that's people who may say: "only one thing is needed". Saying so they evade all their responsibilities.

Some wives, also younger ones, experience their husbands as such Marys. 'Only one thing is needed', and that is their job. When work is finished or at weekends they put their focus on looking after themselves and relax. Isn't there somebody in the house who is doing the needful?

I am sure there are Marthas and Marys who do feel fine as they are. But there are at least as many Marthas and Marys who deep down feel kind of uncomfortable about how they are. There are Marys who would like to become active but somehow find themselves caught up in situations they can't escape from. And there are Marthas who suffer from being restless and who are burdened by their feeling of having to be responsible for so many things. Who are you? Or aren't you "either...or" but "both...and"? Do we all have parts of Martha and Mary inside us?

If so, the question may become even more urgent: How does Jesus actually judge the behaviour of Martha and Mary?

Well, if we take a look at our story again, we may be surprised to notice that Jesus does not condemn what Martha is doing. He doesn't say to her: "That's all rubbish what you are doing. Stop fussing around and sit down beside us". Instead he says: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things", that is to say: Jesus realises and recognises how worried Martha is and how much she cares about serving him in the best way she can. Is it our problem that we immediately associate a kind of reprimand when we hear the repetition "Martha, Martha"?

Still, the question remains: Does Jesus not hear Martha's impatient and angry request to Mary to come and help. Does Jesus really accept what Martha is doing? Why does he say: "Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her." Doesn't he dismiss Martha and her behaviour after all?

At this point we have reached the pivotal question of our story. Contrary to common opinion it is not the aim of the story to set up general rules of life or, more precisely, of Christian life such as e.g. 'whoever, like Mary, listens to the word of God and turns to spiritual things is a better Christian', or 'all practical things of life are less important'. -

To put that straight once and for all. This is definitely not the case. In order to find this out, let's have a closer look at our story once more.

It is not coincidental that the story which is told by the evangelist Luke right before our story, is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Just imagine for a moment what it would mean if one declared Mary's behaviour to be the correct or even better Christian attitude which is valid once and for all. Then the priest and the Levite would have acted correctly rushing past the attacked person because they both were on their way to the temple in Jerusalem to listen to

the word of God and worship him. That's far more important, isn't it? And, by the way, aren't there plenty of Marthas around? It's their job to help, isn't it?

Almost all of us will know Jesus' answer to the expert in the law who had asked him: "Who is my neighbour?": Jesus told him in reference to the Good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise". By this it is obvious that Jesus does not condemn activity or the service to other people as such. If someone cited Mary and her behaviour in a situation where somebody is being attacked, the consequences would be fatal. The victim might bleed to death. -

Joseph Wittig, a catholic priest, once wrote a book with the somewhat strange title: "The life of Jesus in Palestine, Silesia and elsewhere". In this book he tells of a situation which is related to our Bible passage. He writes: "I am still frightened when I think of a farmer's wife who had really taken to heart Jesus' praise of Mary's behaviour. She sat in church for hours every day, she never missed a sermon and repeatedly said to herself: "Only one thing is needed". Her cows in the cowshed looked like skeletons and cried out, as did her husband. But it helped neither the cows nor her husband."

What a gross misunderstanding of Jesus' word. Caring for others, people or animals, doing something to help them is an indispensable part of Christian faith and the cornerstone for the social work of the diakonia, but – and this is an important aim of our story, one has to protect oneself from getting snowed under by helping others. In the setting of a family as well as in the setting of one's work you have to be careful that you don't lose yourself in activism, that you don't burn out but rather find an oasis where you can rest and regain your strength by being quiet, by listening to music, by listening to the word of God, by getting in touch with some kind of spirituality. Thus you may avoid the danger of becoming aimless and self-destructive. That's why it is important to have times of reflection, to read the Bible at home or with others, to have times of prayer or go to worship services on Sundays. Here you will hear again that not everything depends on you alone but also on God, and that it is not only you but also God who is doing his work in this world.

Mary's behaviour is, however, not more important than Martha's. Marys can lose themselves as well and become aimless. They need to be supplemented by Marthas. In other words: Christian belief finds its complete fulfillment in love which becomes active.

Yet in our story Jesus emphasizes only one side, namely listening to his word. Why does he do that?

The answer can only be found in the even wider context. We have already seen that our story is a kind of addition to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke, however, has been telling us now for some chapters that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be sentenced to death.

Today, being the last Sunday before Lent, we start reminding ourselves of this final stage of Jesus' life. Jesus knew what was going to happen to him. It was this very situation when he stopped by at Martha's and Mary's. Now, imagine, a good friend of yours who won't live for very much longer, stops by at your house, maybe for a short time only. What would then be more important: to sit down and talk or rather listen, listen to what he would like to share with you? Or would it be more important to eagerly wait on him?

Perceive the signs of time, that's what Jesus is trying to tell Martha. "You will not always have me" [Matthew 26,11], as he had told his disciples after being anointed with very expensive perfume by the woman in Bethany.

Therefore, in this very situation Mary chose the right thing, or even what is better. Had the situation been another one, things might have looked completely different.

By the way, Jesus himself did not live according to just one rule of life or faith. He practised both. When help was needed he became active, helped and healed. When, however, it was more necessary to wind down and listen to the word of God, he withdrew into the desert. During this time he did not heal others but gathered new strength for what was ahead of him. Would anybody have reprimanded him for that?

Both is needed, the so called "vita activa", that is the active life, doing something, as well as the "vita contemplativa", that is the contemplating, meditative life. One can't be played off against the other.

Alas, the Bible does not decide for us when the one is needed more than the other. You are asked to decide yourself according to the very situation and according to the signs of time. You are, however, given a little help, and that is praying. Praying can help us to come to a decision about what is needed in a certain situation. Luke must have been of the same opinion, because right after our story he tells about Jesus teaching his disciples to pray: "Our father who art in heaven..." In praying, in talking with God we can and we may ask God to help us decide, whether in a certain situation we serve him better by listening to his word or by becoming active and help, be it at our job, be it at school or in our families.

Praying may help the Marthas to sit down to receive peace and strength for themselves and for others; and praying may help the Marys to experience that their listening to God's word is deepened and fulfilled by turning to others and supporting them actively.

May God grant us that the restless Martha-part inside us be led to quietness and peace now and again, and that the contemplative Mary-part inside us be, when necessary, shaken awake and made to get going - for Jesus' sake and for the sake of other people.

Amen