

The Gospel according to Luke, Ch. 10, vv. 38-41

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 only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Today's Gospel story of Martha and Mary is, as far as I can recall, the only one in the whole of the Gospels in which Jesus appears to have a day off – or at least some time off. Time he can spend relaxing in the house of friends; and a time when, unlike so many other times we know about, nobody comes and makes demands on him. This was rarely the case, apparently: he hardly ever seems to have been able to visit anyone without the house being surrounded by people bringing their sick to be cured [Lk. 4, 40], even breaking open the roof to let a sick person down to him [Lk. 5, 18-19], or else someone coming and pouring perfume over his head [Mt. 26, 7]; when he preached out in the countryside he would find himself surrounded by 5,000 people needing food [Mt. 14, 15-16], or by a crowd determined to prevent him from getting away [Lk. 4, 42]. He couldn't even go for a weekend walk through the fields without the Pharisees spying on him in the hope of catching him doing forbidden things on the Sabbath [Lk. 6, 1-2]. We do not know of any case when he refused to respond to the people in need who came to him. Even when he tried to, he was quickly persuaded otherwise, whether that need was for something as trivial as more wine at a wedding feast [Jn. 2, 4], which Viola Chrzanowski talked to us about last month, or as serious as the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman who pleaded for her deranged child to be cured [Mk. 7, 26-28], pinning her faith on Jesus although she was not a Jew – you remember her sharp reply to him, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table." But I think even Jesus must often have longed to be able to relax a bit. And here, it seems, he can; without any fear of whatever the equivalents were in those days of paparazzi peering in at the windows,

hoping to get a good story for the Jerusalem Journal or the Bethany Bulletin, or of intruders with smartphones wanting to make a selfie with him. Just a quiet house where he can relax on a couch with only one other person close by. The text says Mary “sat listening”. I have always imagined her not merely listening, but making perceptive contributions to the conversation as well, though my wife reminds me that Jesus was a master in communicating not only with the educated and well-informed, but with simple people as well. But anyway, there she is keeping the honoured guest company. While Martha is working in the kitchen. Which I will come back to in a minute.

This story is recorded in only one of the Gospels. There’s no point in asking you to guess which one, since you have it in black and white in your service sheets. But if you hadn’t got it in front of you, somebody with a good general knowledge of the Gospels might say: “A story with two women as main characters: it must be from Luke.” For in Luke’s Gospel women do indeed play a larger role than in the other Gospels; he is the evangelist who seems most interested in the role they play, both in the world as a whole and in the birth of the Christian faith in particular. Some people might say: he is the evangelist who notices women when for the others they sometimes seem to be invisible. Women we know only through Luke include Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist [Lk. 1], Anna the prophetess who recognised the baby Jesus in the Temple [Lk. 2, 36ff]; the Widow of Nain, whose dead son was restored to her by Jesus [Lk. 7, 11ff]; and the group of women, including a Joanna and a Susanna [Lk. 8, 2-3], who served Jesus and his disciples and helped to support them in Galilee, and then went to Jerusalem with him and were present at the Crucifixion [Lk. 23, 49] and afterwards [Lk. 24, 10].

As far as Martha and Mary are concerned, we assume that they are the same Martha and Mary who appear in John’s Gospel as the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead [Jn 11]: at any rate, as my Bible commentary points out, their characters match in the two stories: “the busy, active, hospitable Martha: the quiet, contemplative, teachable Mary.” But Luke says nothing about

a brother in the household. And I am very glad he doesn't. Because where would Brother Lazarus fit into this picture? In the story as told by Luke, the friend of women, it is not Lazarus but Mary who sits at Jesus' feet listening to his words, and she is not told that a woman's place is in the kitchen, but that the part she has chosen is better than that of her busy housekeeping sister. In Biblical times this might have been revolutionary, or perhaps a better word would be prophetic: but I hope that nowadays it is so much a matter of course that I do not need to go into it any further.

In my youth, a woman friend who was not only a deeply committed Christian but also an excellent housekeeper and a marvellous cook (although her name was neither Martha nor Mary) had a card pinned up in her kitchen, with a poem entitled "The Kitchen Prayer". I have never come across this poem anywhere else and was going to ask her if she could send it me, when I remembered that nowadays there is something called the internet; and there I discovered that the poem appears to be quite well known. It is by an American woman called Klara Munkres, and it starts like this:

"Lord of all pots and pans and things, since I've not time to be
A saint by doing lovely things or watching late with Thee
Or dreaming in the dawn light, or storming Heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates."

I'll tell you later how it goes on. Now in our reading we have Martha getting meals and washing up the plates, but she is not exactly going about it in a saint-like way – except perhaps in the sense that she seems to be doing her best to make a martyr of herself – a martyr to meat pies, one might say. She certainly feels herself hard done by; and it's not just the fact that she has to work hard, but also, or even more, the fact that while she is working Mary appears to be relaxing and enjoying herself which gets Martha annoyed.

Now there is nothing in the least bit wrong about what Martha is actually doing. It is, after all, her house and she has invited Jesus in – she "opened her home to him", the text says. Full marks so far. He is an honoured guest – Martha

calls him “Lord”: and all the social conventions of every age and every kind of society agree in saying, firstly that all guests are honoured guests, and secondly that if you have guests you owe it to them to do them as much honour as you can by offering the best hospitality you are able to. Which is exactly what Martha is trying to do. But the problem is the attitude with which she goes about it. Lavish hospitality can be guest-centred, as an expression of true regard and care for the person it is given to; but it can also be host-centred, if it is more a matter of showing off *my* house, *my* pictures, *my* tableware, *my* good taste and *my* cooking skills, rather than a matter of relationships and communication between people. On an occasion when my wife had invited friends to coffee and was not sure how well the cake had turned out, she said, “Well, I’m sure you aren’t here just for the cake!” In the classic African novel “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe, the central character Okonkwo gives an enormous feast for his entire clan, and a relation says in his speech of thanks: “A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village, it is not because of the moon. Everyone can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.” This is what Martha seems to have overlooked. Jesus listens to her grumbling and takes her seriously, but tries to put her on the right track. It is not totally clear what he means by “Only one thing is needed”: generally it is assumed that he means something like “Of course we want to eat, and we will enjoy it, but one dish is enough, rather than an elaborate spread; because the important thing is not what we eat, but that we are together.”

So how do we assess the spiritual value of working in the kitchen? – As a translator one often has to learn about areas one knew little about beforehand, and in recent months I have had to concern myself with Martin Luther’s work ethic and his concept of occupation as vocation. I won’t try to explain this in detail here today – there are too many Lutheran theologians present who could do it much better than I can: but there is a well-known English hymn that sums it up very nicely, and which we are going to sing after the sermon: the hymn “Teach

me, my God and King”, and I ask you to look at the text in your service sheets. This hymn is a setting of a poem, “The Elixir”, by the 17th century clergyman and poet George Herbert. Herbert takes up Luther’s doctrine that every one of us has a calling, a vocation, to do God’s work in our daily lives, in whatever place in the world we find ourselves. For example, we ask God to give us our daily bread, and he does: but he doesn’t make it fall like manna from heaven, but uses the work of farmers, butchers, bakers and cooks. If we are aware of this, then all work, even the most humble, is prayer and is holy. Thus in the first verse of the hymn, George Herbert writes “and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee”; and in the third verse “Nothing can be so mean, which with this tincture, *for thy sake*, will not grow bright and clean.” The housemaid sweeping a room, Martin Luther says, and so does George Herbert in verse 4, has an occupation, a vocation, that is to be no less highly regarded than that of a reigning prince, or of a pastor and preacher. Doing even the most menial work to the best of your ability is just as much service of God as preaching a sermon; indeed, it *is* a sermon in that it witnesses to God’s love for us and ours for him and for our neighbours in the world. According to this concept, Martha’s work in the kitchen ought to be just as valuable as Mary’s sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his discourse.

Ought to be, yes. So when Martha came to Jesus to complain about being left to do all the work, he could have told her that; he could have encouraged her: “Martha, you are doing a great job, you are putting everything you have into serving others.” But he didn’t. There is no mistaking what he did say: “Mary has chosen what is better.” So where has Martha gone wrong?

She seems to have lost sight of the point of it all. She isn’t merely cooking: she is, as the old translation put it, “cumbered with much serving”: “cumbered”, that is to say, burdened by a heavy load; she is worried and upset, she is “distracted”, a word which comes very nicely here as it has two meanings, on the one hand the same as “upset”, “very agitated”, but also the literal meaning of “having your attention drawn away from what you are supposed to be attending to”. We might well envy Martha this opportunity to, quite literally and directly,

serve the Lord, because that is precisely what the work is that she is doing; and yet in her stress she seems to forget that, to forget that tincture, that magic, transforming elixir, “*for thy sake*”. She forgets that what she is doing can and should show the love of God in the world and her love of her neighbour. And so her work, worthy though it is, becomes not a prayer or a sermon, but a burden. And as Paul might have said in his Letter to the Corinthians [cf. I Cor. 13]: If I put the most exquisite dishes before my guests and make the most delicious soufflé they have ever tasted, but have not love, I am an empty saucepan and a broken plate.

Mary has chosen what is better. No doubt all of us have to be Marthas a lot of the time, and no doubt Mary normally helps with the housework as well. But Mary understands that there are higher things, and that particularly on this day when Jesus himself is a visitor to her home there must be time for those higher things as well: and perhaps it is this understanding, rather than the meal, that Jesus is referring to when he says “Only one thing is needed”. There are times when the most important thing is to be attentive and to listen, without being “distracted”, to what someone has and needs to say – and that someone isn’t necessarily Jesus, but may be a person close to us with something on their mind. Martha’s meal will soon be eaten; but what Mary gains on this occasion is something that will stay with her for ever: like that other Mary, who “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” [Lk. 2, 19] – which by the way is another thing about a woman that we learn only from Luke.

When my wife and I read this text together, she was reminded of one of her favourite children’s stories, which I am sure most of you will know: the story of the mouse Frederick, who while the other mice are hard at work collecting corn, nuts and straw for the winter, lies on his back enjoying the sunshine. When the other mice complain he is lazy and call on him to help them, he tells them he is collecting too: collecting sunlight, colours, words, hopes and dreams – all the things that do good to the soul. And during the dark days of winter, when the reserves the other mice have collected are almost exhausted, Frederick cheers them with stories that reawaken the sunshine and the colours of summer.

When God created the world, he rested on the seventh day. And he saw that it was good. Too many of us have forgotten this and have no time for the beautiful things of life; those who never seem to get away from their work, who have no time for their families and friends, or to watch their children growing up. But as someone – I don't know who – famously remarked: "Nobody ever said on his deathbed, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office'." So while we do not need, and should not try, to take all the busy Marthas away from the valuable and even exhausting work they do for God and their neighbours, it is our duty to make sure that they too have time out; time to sit at Jesus' feet, time to collect the beautiful things that will brighten any dark days that may be ahead.

I promised to read you the rest of the "Kitchen Prayer". It goes like this:

“Although I must have Martha’s hands, I have a Mary mind,
And when I black the boots and shoes, Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth, what time I scrub the floor:
Accept this meditation, Lord: I haven’t time for more.

Warm all the kitchen with Thy love and light it with Thy peace,
Forgive me all my worrying and make my grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food, in room or by the sea,
Accept this service that I do: I do it unto Thee.”

I have made copies of the poem, so please take one after the service if you would like to. And let us pray that we and all the other Marthas may have and keep a Mary mind, and find time to sit at His feet. Amen.

[The complete "Kitchen Prayer" is on the next page.]

Kitchen Prayer

by Klara Munkres (1879-1971)

Lord of all pots and pans and things, since I've not time to be
A saint by doing lovely things or watching late with Thee
Or dreaming in the dawn light, or storming Heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates.

Although I must have Martha's hands, I have a Mary mind,
And when I black the boots and shoes, Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth, what time I scrub the floor:
Accept this meditation, Lord: I haven't time for more.

Warm all the kitchen with Thy love and light it with Thy peace,
Forgive me all my worrying and make my grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food, in room or by the sea,
Accept this service that I do: I do it unto Thee.