

I don't know about you, but my first inclination upon reading or hearing read out loud, the story of Mary and Martha, is to take sides. I'm betting it's the same for you. In my experience, most people, when we're being honest, tend to see ourselves as Martha people - getters of things done. We see ourselves as workers hard at the task, for the good of all? Most of us tend toward the Martha side of the continuum, at least in our own eyes.

So, we're just a little bit taken aback when Jesus gently chastised Martha for getting on Mary's case. I mean, come on. She's cooking, cleaning, serving, and refilling tea cups. She was probably the one who ran the vacuum cleaner before the guests arrived. Meanwhile, her sister was in the living room sitting at Jesus' feet, the place of a disciple, lapping up every word he said.

It's Martha who was fulfilling the cultural expectations for women of her time, doing what a good hostess does. That is, right up to the next moment when, frustrated and, no doubt, tired, she stormed into the living room, interrupted the conversation and, instead of addressing her sister, addressed Jesus. "Master, Mary is not doing what a hostess is supposed to do. She's being a slacker. She's just sitting there on the floor, talking, when there's work to be done. What do you have to say about that?"

If Jesus took Mary's side, she might never get up off the floor and Martha might just quit working and let the dishes pile up to the ceiling. Not a good outcome. If he took Martha's side, the dishes would get done in a timely fashion, but important lessons would have been lost to the expediency of having a neat, clean kitchen. So, what was he to do? What was he to say?

Martha, he said, you are very busy doing lots of work, occupied by many things. But, Jesus said, there was one thing that was needed more than anything else, even more than the food and beverages you are serving to us and the dishes you are clearing and washing.

Whoa! These are fighting words to a Martha person. Are you telling me that what I'm doing isn't important? Hospitality was, after all, one of the most vital and important values in first-century Jewish culture. We read of it in our first reading from the Book of Genesis this morning. Hebrew scriptures are full of stories of how God rewarded people who showed hospitality and punished those who didn't. Take another look at what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah if you doubt it. In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant was so generously received by Rebekah at the well that he recognised her as the perfect wife for Isaac. And in the second book of Kings, the prophets Elijah and Elisha repaid their kind and generous hosts by curing their sons of life-threatening illnesses.

No, everything in Martha's background, everything in her life, everything she learned at her mother's knee taught her that hospitality wasn't just some optional thing you did from time to time. It was a moral imperative for the true people of God. And hospitality was exactly the thing she was doing, here.

To make his point, Jesus used a food metaphor that was often missed by our translations. Most translations have Jesus saying that, "Mary has chosen the better part." In fact, however, that word that is translated "part" can also be translated "portion." You may be more familiar with that version. Mary has chosen the "better portion," as one might choose a better portion of meat or vegetables from a platter of food that was being offered.

Martha, who seemed to be obsessed with making sure everyone was fed and who would, as custom dictated, offer the best portions of the food to her guests, was now being told by Jesus that the better portions of food she was offering were not the most important thing. There was a portion of food that was even better and more important than that which she had placed on the table and that was the food for the soul, that Jesus was offering through his words.

Martha, he seemed to be saying, the work of hospitality is all well and good because, through our generous treatment of others, we draw closer to YAWEH. But we can become so obsessed with our hospitality that it can actually become a distraction, a barrier between us and God. When we work so hard at serving others, we may come to resent them... When we work so long at being hospitable, we may grow angry at those we are called to welcome... When we take the entire responsibility for hospitality upon our own shoulders, we may become aggrieved because others have not taken up the task with us... When our devotion to the law is so obsessive, we may end up living our lives in a state of indignation, irritation, exasperation, and pique...

Before we come to any of those places, Jesus said, we must first learn to stop, to sit, to rest, to listen, and to learn from him. Martha, lay down your scrub brush and towel. Sit. Listen. And the lesson to be taken from them is this: There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect.

Unavoidably wrapped up in the idea of discipleship and truly listening is submission to authority. Jesus is worth listening to because Jesus is authoritative. We live in what some call an “age of authenticity.” By this, they mean that our culture is drowning in calls to be “authentic” and “individual” at the expense of all else. Faith, unfortunately, is not immune from this disease. Faith has never (until recently) been conceived as a strictly individual exercise. Rather, it is done in community and in submission to authority. As Anglicans we reflect this through our catholic and reformed heritage, the local parish, our governance of clergy and laity, our orders of Bishops, Priests and Deacons, the sacraments, adherence to Holy Writ, the Creeds and the teachings of the ages right back to the Celtic Saints. But the “age of authenticity” encourages individualism apart from community: individual interpretations of Scripture, solely individual relationships with God, Church shopping and individual determinations of what feels right or wrong.

How do we resist the “age of authenticity”? This is a bit like asking a fish how to avoid water, yet the answer can be extremely simple. Do what Mary did with Jesus: kneel and submit. Join your local church community, or renew your membership - the body of Christ—and be willing to submit to it. This one at Holy Trinity Kew in my humble view is not too shabby!

Walking with Jesus is never easy, but it's far easier alongside a collection of people who are attempting the walk themselves. This is not to suggest that any church community - or even the church spread through- out time and space - is infallibly right, but it is to suggest that communities of people are often able to discern much better than individuals. There's a good chance that a close community - one genuinely walking with Jesus - will see blind spots in your life that you don't. If you aren't willing to submit to a community, those blind spots will remain blind.

We are listeners and doers. Again, this isn't a “Mary the listener” versus “Martha the doer” situation. But they can also represent contrasting examples of devotion. It was not Martha's desire to be hospitable that was wrong—her work was holy—but her priorities. Martha thought it was enough to open up her home to Jesus, Mary opened up her heart. He doesn't just want to be in the

other room while we worry about things (the future, school, finances, relationships, being a good Christian, etc.) he wants to be right in our midst. Christ isn't some distant figure we need to work for: He's a Lord we need to work with (and indeed it's because he works in us).

Mary shows us we can be free of society's expectations. We are called to be doers, but we are called to be doers who listen. When we prioritise time with God, we are actually mobilised and empowered by his Holy Spirit to work and serve because he will be at work within us. He will be our collaborator (1 Cor. 3:9).

Notice that Martha is distracted by her tasks, the very thing Jesus later rebukes her for. The problem is not what she is doing, but that she is distracted. Our fast-paced culture is no stranger to distraction; our attention focused elsewhere and lives becoming self-centered without true purpose. Never in the history of the world are people so distracted. Right now, you (probably) have in your pocket a device with more computing power than was required to send a man to the moon. And that device can entertain you endlessly. Boredom has been eradicated, but are you a slave to it? What if I said, don't use your phone, other to give or receive phone calls for a week?

For all of the goods they provide, our connected devices ensure that we are all thoroughly and completely distracted. On one level, this distraction couldn't be more different than what distracted Martha (at least she was distracted by preparing her house for Jesus Christ; most of us are distracted by Fortnite, Instagram, the internet and text messages). Yet at the root it's the same basic problem: the restlessness of our hearts apart from Jesus. The challenge to overcome this distraction in favour of total submission to the Lordship of Jesus has never been greater, but the call to Jesus is the same: to come and learn at his feet. Only by diverting our attention from the temporary to the eternal can we "store up treasures in heaven"; for where our treasure is, there the desires of our heart will be also.

Fr Robert