

Martha and Mary

This, surely, is one of the most familiar passages in the Gospel, the story of Martha and Mary. And I am much surprised if, at the end of it, we don't have a sneaking sympathy for Martha.

I am sure you can imagine the scene, for it is a very homely one. It will, in essence, have been played out in millions of households over thousands of years. One person, red-faced and breathless, toiling away in the kitchen; another, apparently bone-idle, lazing around in the living room. The former storms into the living room and says something like: 'come on you lazy (I'll leave you to insert whatever word you would be inclined to use here), give me a hand in the kitchen. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you would sympathise with the hard pressed, put-upon toiler, not the idle good for nothing watching strictly come dancing on the telly.

And yet. In this case, let us pause. Martha has done what hundreds of us have done and been mildly, very gently, reproved. 'Martha, you worry and fret about so many things and yet few are needed. Indeed only one.'

So, what is this better part? It is, of course, Jesus himself. Mary, perhaps because of a naturally contemplative temperament (and we must never forget that we are all made different and some are more naturally still and reflective than others), has settled herself down at the feet of the Lord. Perhaps she might have been a little inconsiderate, leaving Martha to get on with the domestic chores; but perhaps, too, she recognised that something special was happening. Dimly, she might even have been aware that she was in the presence of the Son of God himself. In her busyness, Martha probably didn't even notice. So distracted was she that she probably became a little self-centred. How could Mary do this to ME. Why is she sitting there doing nothing and just listening to HIM? How could THEY just leave me to it?! Like water in a kettle, she started to heat up inside until, boiling with irritation, she let out a great whistle of outrage and both of them get it in the neck: 'my sister is letting me do all the work and you're letting her. Well, thank you very much.'

Looking around, I suspect that quite a lot of us are more Martha than Mary. This is a bustling place, and I well remember for instance how hard some of you worked on the night of the Festival a fortnight ago. There many of you were on

a hot summer evening working away like fury, serving food and cleaning up in the kitchen. And thank God for you, for without you, no church would ever get anything done. And there are times when there is such work to be done: the cooking of food, the moving of chairs, the carting of tables. But there is, too, the blessing of silence and stillness.

And the example of Mary reminds us that we should not let the attitude of Martha rule our lives to the exclusion of all else. In the haste and busyness, she failed to notice what was really important: the presence of the Lord. She was simply too distracted to see what was in front of her. Had she done so, she might have dropped the pots and pans, dried the soap suds off her arms, and come in and sat down for a while. It wouldn't have been lazy. It would have been right.

In the gentlest possible way, Martha learned a hard lesson that day. She learned that she had to pay attention to what really matters. She had to learn that, however important the daily tasks and chores are, and we know that they won't do themselves, it is even more important to make space to be with Jesus Christ. It won't be time wasted. It will be time well spent. We live in a busy, noisy, congested city. Personally, I wouldn't live anywhere else. But many people live busy, noisy, congested lives, and do. 'Be still and know that I am God'.

Mary, too, may have needed to learn a different lesson. After all, there is always work to be done, and she has to take her share in doing it. There is a lovely story about a novice nun in a convent who, after only three months in the convent went to Reverend Mother to say that she had had a vision of the Sacred Heart. 'Very good, sister', replied Reverend Mother, 'Now go out and scrub the lavatories.'

The Gospel is about getting the right balance. Most of us get it wrong. Today's Gospel reminds us of the need to get it right. When the needful tasks of the day are done, when you have put the last plate away in the cupboard and the forks back in the drawer and you sit down with a cup of tea or a glass of something good, try to listen to the Lord and be in his presence.

