

Study7: Mary and Martha: making time can be difficult

Introduction

The background of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the New Testament

Luke 10:38-42

Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany and shares a meal with them. Mary sits at Jesus' feet while Martha complains of the work.

John 11:1-44

Mary and Martha send for Jesus to help their brother who was very sick. Jesus delays coming and Lazarus dies. Jesus travels to Bethany and raises Lazarus from the dead.

John 12:1-3

Jesus stays at the home of Mary and Martha and shares a meal with them. Lazarus is at the table with them. Mary uses expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet.

John 12:9-11

People come to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus. The Pharisees plot to kill the Lord.



Christ in the House of Mary and Martha
Jan Vermeer (c. 1654-56) National Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland

Reading

This short passage in Luke tells us that Jesus was expected at Martha's home in Bethany. Mary and Martha's personality are radically different.

Martha's way of preparing for Jesus made her so preoccupied with getting everything ready that she seemed to miss the purpose of Jesus' visit.

Luke 10: 38-42

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

40 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!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things,

42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Study questions

- Can you identify with Martha?
- Do you think that if Mary had got up and done her bit, Martha would then have made time for Jesus?
- Mary emerges from this story with a word of commendation while Martha, for all her good intentions, ends up with a firm if gentle reprimand. What do you think?
- Why does Luke recount this incident?

Discussion questions

- How might you make sufficient time for the things that really matter in your life?
- How often do you, like Martha, brood, fret or worry unnecessarily?
- We are not told what Jesus said to Mary as she sat listening at his feet. What do you think he might have said?
- How might this story help us to pray?
- What might Jesus say to us?
- What is the hardest thing in being still and quiet? Have you any suggestions as to what might help overcome such problems?



Comment on Lazarus, Mary & Martha's social status

Martha and Mary are introduced as two sisters who offered hospitality to Jesus and the people traveling with him.

They had a brother, Lazarus, who appeared in a story in John's gospel. The three young people were friends of Jesus. They behaved with him in a natural way, speaking openly about what they thought. Jesus, who was quite capable of overwhelming people with his presence, was informal and easy in their company.

This was important for a man like Jesus. People who are held in high esteem, as Jesus was, are often isolated, even though they are at the centre of the crowd.

Leonardo da Vinci captures this isolation in his painting of The Last Supper: Jesus is sitting in the middle of a table with his friends all around him, but he seems alone, as those dearest to him lean away from him, separating themselves from him as they will do later, when he is arrested and faces death.

We know little about the background of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They may have been orphans who had the management of their own lives, since there is no mention of their parents. Moreover the eldest of the three, Martha, appeared to be in control of the household.

They seemed to be affluent. They had a house large enough to accommodate many people, as their hospitality to Jesus and his group of friends shows. They appeared to have no occupation. Mary

could afford to buy a very expensive perfume.

None of the three appeared to have a spouse. This was unusual in Jewish society, where people were usually married young.

This may mean that they were quite young, perhaps still in their teens, or that they were on the edge of society, and not acceptable in some way. In any case, they seem to have been young, comparatively well-off, independent, and intelligent.

Meditation:

Drop thy still dews of quietness,

Till all our strivings cease;

Take from our souls the strain and stress,

And let our ordered lives confess

The beauty of thy peace.

(John Greenleaf Whittier)



Prayer

Father of Heaven! Whose goodness has brought us in safety to the close of this day,

Dispose our hearts in fervent prayer.

Another day is now gone, and added to those, for which we were before accountable.

Teach us almighty Father, to consider this solemn truth, as we should do,

That we may feel the importance of every day,

And every hour as it passes, and earnestly strive to make a better use of what thy goodness may yet bestow on us, than we have done of the time past.

Amen.

(Jane Austen: an evening prayer)

The Grace

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the Love of God,*

*and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore.*

Amen