

Sermon for 18th July 2010

Mary and Martha

Trinity 7 (Luke 10.38-42 Colossians 1.15-28)

I'm a Mary, not a Martha. At least that's who I always thought I was as a teenager who had endless patience and loved listening to people's stories. Now I'm not so sure, I think I've become more of a Martha as I've got older - much to my dismay.

Perhaps this is a story women engage with more naturally than men. If it is, that's a shame, because it has a lot to say to all of us. Here's a reflection on this passage that I've found very helpful, and I hope you do too. It's written by an American called Ken Gire.

The disciples are with Jesus initially, but they don't appear to be with Him now. Why? Is the house too small? Do they all need a break from each other after being on the road for so long? Is Jesus tired, is that why He comes to this house?

Is He hungry? If so, what? For food? Or is He hungry for something else, something that may be the crowds and His disciples can't give Him?

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to His death. A few miles before He gets there, He stops here, at the home of these two women. He stops here, I think, because He is hungry for someone who will listen, someone who will understand, someone who will feel something of the heaviness He carries with Him on that uphill road to Jerusalem. Yes, He is hungry. But not for food.

Which of these hungers does Martha see when she greets Him at the door? Does she see a window into what is going on inside Him, a window into what He is thinking, feeling, needing? Or does she see just the leanness in His face and the angle of the sun, telling her it's nearly time for dinner?

Martha goes to the kitchen to prepare the dinner, leaving Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. What words is He is aching to say, not just to Mary but to both of them? What words is He aching to hear, not just from Mary but from both of them?

Only one of them, though, pauses at that window. Only one of them sees the hunger in His soul. And it's not Martha.

Martha's in the kitchen. She works faster to make up for Mary's absence, but the faster she works the more steamed-up she gets. Finally she wipes the sweat from her face and storms out of the kitchen with a frying-pan-of-a-question waving in her hand. But why does she shake it at Jesus and not at Mary? And why does she refer to her as "my sister" instead of by name? The answers to those questions reveal something not only of her frustration but her anger.

Can you hear in her question not just the irritation but the indictment? "Lord, don't you care?" Instead of waiting for an answer, Martha issues an order. What does that tell you about the nature of her question and about the tone of voice she used in asking it?

But her wrath is met with a gentle answer. There is great tenderness in Jesus' reply. Can you hear it?

In the past I have more or less identified with Mary. But over the years, as I have had the opportunity to look deeper into my life, the more I see of Martha. The truth, I think, is that there is something of both sisters in all of us. And that is why so many of us saw much of the time find ourselves in the middle of an inner tug-of-war, pulled one way by our duties and another by our devotion.

The words spoken to Martha of words spoken and also to the Martha in me. But what were those words correcting? It was the one we, not her work. It was her being upset, not being under pressure. The issue wasn't her preparations; it was her distractions. It wasn't the many things is; it was that the many things didn't revolve around the one thing that was needed.

There was no fire centre at Martha was working from, no solitude of heart, no steel axis around which her activities revolved. That's why the wheels fell off her attitude. And that's why, with some regularity, a fall off in mine.

When my attitude starts to wobble, I know it's because I'm distracted. I don't realise how much I'm distracted, though, until the axis starts grinding and heating up. Like Martha, I get frustrated, irritated, and sometimes stomping-mad-tell-somebody-off angry.

I know what a will is starting to fall off when the meal I'm preparing becomes more important than the people I'm preparing it for. When my work becomes more important than the family I'm working for. When a point I'm making becomes more important than the person I'm making it to. That's how I can tell I've lost the still axis. When I lose sight of what's more important. When I lose a sense of the sacredness of another human being, especially the human being is closest to me, the ones in my family.

I want to live in a way so that I don't lose sight of what's important or lose a sense of the sacredness of others. I want to live in a way so I can see you windows of the soul.

I don't want to live in the kitchen of religious activity, distracted with all my preparations. I don't want to leave slumped over some steamed-up stove, worried and upset about so many things. I want to live and the Saviour's feet, gazing into His eyes, listening to His words, and seeing as many windows as He'll show me.

At His feet is where we learn to pause and those windows. It starts by loving Him and longing to hear His voice. When we are slaving away in some kitchen where the pots and pans are clanging, it's hard to hear that voice. But when we're at His feet and our heart is still, we can hear Him even when He whispers.

*From 'Windows of the Soul:
Experiencing God in New Ways' by Ken Gire*

Blessings,
Gill