

Mary and Martha

Who were Mary and Martha, and given how little is written about them why are their names so familiar to Christians?

Mary and Martha are not frequently mentioned in the New Testament, three times in total and perhaps the most famous story about them appears in Luke 10:38-42, but they also figure prominently in John 11:1-12:8 and in John 12:1-8

Our reading from Luke 10:38-42 tells of Jesus visiting the house of Martha (in John 12:1, the meeting takes place at a house which is also the home of Lazarus, who is not mentioned in Luke). Mary, sits at Jesus' feet listening to him. Martha, "distracted by her many tasks," asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Jesus instead says: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her"

When most people read this story, they often imagine a harried housewife complaining about her lazy sister as she struggles to cater for a great many strangers who are guests in her house, including this famous teacher and actually in if this was the case for many of us Martha's request wouldn't really seem unreasonable. She has a house full of visitors and is clearly anxious about serving them well. However, dig a little deeper and this isn't exactly what has happened.

Perhaps one of the first things to note is Martha appears to be the head of the household. Now as we discussed when we looked at the book of Ruth a few weeks ago this is highly unusual in Jewish culture, Martha's name is the feminine form of the Aramaic word Mar that means Lord which almost seems to be a pun on behalf of the gospel writer. But if she is the head of the household this also implies she isn't married. And for an unmarried woman to invite a group of travelling men into her home would have been distinctly radical to say the least. And yet she does, and Jesus accepts. And then Mary has the audacity to sit at the feet of this respected rabbi who is a stranger and receive teaching.

Once again, an outrageous thing for a woman to even think of doing.

So what do we know about Mary and Martha?

Well, John 11:1-12:8 also features the sisters. Here, they are located in Bethany, and the story revolves around Jesus' raising of their brother, Lazarus, from the dead. We are told that Jesus loved all three siblings (John 11:5), and this is hugely significant as this makes them the only people mentioned by name in the Gospel as being loved by Jesus. Both women figure significantly in John's story: Martha confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (John 11:27), and Mary's tears prompt Jesus to raise Lazarus (John 11:28-44). In gratitude, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume at a banquet where "Martha served" (John 12:2). Here, Judas criticizes her for wasting money, but Jesus commends her. All four Gospels contain stories of a woman who anoints Jesus; only John names her as Mary of Bethany.

So what is really happening here?

Well I would like to suggest that perhaps the reason Martha felt secure in asking Jesus into her home was because he was a friend, the passage from John makes this quite clear. So Martha has seen and old friend and invites him and his colleagues in. Mary because she knows him well feels secure enough to sit at his feet, something highly unconventional. Meanwhile Martha bustles about, distracted; making sure everything was just perfect for her guest. This would have been a typical expectation for a woman in the first century. Then Martha asked Jesus if he cared that Mary had left her alone to do all the serving, she phrased the question in a way that indicated she expected him to say, “Yes, I care.” The implication is don’t you care she is rushing around after you as well?

Jesus’ gentle rebuke reminds his audience to attend to what’s important—his presence, of course. But his presence as someone just to be with. Not someone to rush around trying to impress. What is important is him being with them as a friend, a family member, not someone who requires elaborate preparation or service.

It is about both friendship and discipleship, and the fact that it is about women makes it that much more extraordinary.

This story attests to the fact that in Jesus’ ministry, women are not, nor have ever been, second-class citizens. And it makes it clear its not about ‘being busy for Jesus’.

So what about poor stressed Martha, Maybe it’s easy from this mornings to assume it’s Martha who has missed the

point of Jesus' teaching, but In John's account when Jesus arrives to meet the grieving sisters who have called him to come and help their brother Lazarus, it is Martha who recognises who Jesus really is when she refers to him with three Christological titles: Messiah, Son of God, and the one who is coming. (This puts her in the same company with Peter's confession. [Not bad for a busy hostess!]).

Mary says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." and a short time later it is she who anoints Jesus feet with expensive oil and earns a rebuke from Judas.

So who are Mary and Martha. Are they just are two sisters struggling to get by in a world ran for and by men, I don't think so, given that Martha appears to be the head of a household which can afford to feed a large number of guests, I think they were doing pretty well.

And above all our Bible account recalls that they are two women who defy convention by becoming friends with a celebrated rabbi, and then are among the first to recognise who Christ really was when even his closest male disciples often seemed confused.

They are like the other women we have talked about in our sermon series, women shaping the reality they found themselves in, not ultimately just defined by the times or circumstances but challenging accepted norms.