

Martha and Mary: A reflection by the Revd Jonathan Evens, Associate Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, UK

Luke 10. 38 – 42: Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "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."

Martha opened her home to Jesus and his disciples. Providing hospitality and welcome to strangers was of vital importance within Judaism and in Middle Eastern culture generally. The rabbis taught that Abraham left off a discussion with God and went to greet guests when they arrived at his camp. He ran to greet them during the hottest day on record and served them the best food he could put together. Based on that example, the rabbis said that taking care of guests is greater than receiving the divine presence.

When Jesus sent out his disciples to prepare the way for him to come to towns and villages on the way to Jerusalem, he told them to look out for and stay with those, like Martha, who would welcome them (Luke 10). So, Jesus' words to Martha, while they can appear critical, were not intended as a denigration of the role she was fulfilling, which, as we have thought, has a vital place in Middle Eastern culture. Jesus had already affirmed Martha's hospitality by welcoming and receiving all she offered. However, he also wanted to affirm Mary's action as well because Mary's action points to an alternative role for women which could only begin to be realised as a result of his affirmation.



Cristo en casa de Marta y María, Diego Velázquez 1599-1660, bequeathed by Sir William H Gregory, 1891, National Art Gallery

Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to what he said. That was the usual posture of a disciple of any teacher in the ancient world. But disciples were usually male, so Mary would have been quietly breaking the rule that reserved study for males, not females. Martha was possibly not merely asking for help but demanding that Mary keep to the traditional way of behaving. Jesus, though, affirmed Mary in the place and role of a disciple: "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus refused to be sidetracked by issues of gender when faced with women in any kind of need and consistently put people before dogma. Luke's Gospel not only reports that Jesus had female disciples, but specifically names them in Luke 8.1-3. Throughout his Gospel, Luke pays particular and positive attention to the role of women; presenting women, not only as witnesses to the events surrounding the birth and resurrection of Jesus, but also as active participants in God's Messianic purposes. This counter-balance to the patriarchy of the time was necessary in order to signal the value of both women and men in God's plan of salvation and their equal importance in the new community that was the Church. Ultimately, this has led to the point that we have reached relatively recently in the Church of England of ordaining women as priests and bishops.

We know that within the Church and wider society, including the City of London, gender equality and full equality across the diversity agenda is still to be fully realised. Here at St Stephen Walbrook we have held two events recently regarding gender diversity; a meeting of Women and the Church regarding the ongoing campaign for gender justice in the Church of England and 'Women in the City' an event which highlighted women's involvement in the civic, cultural, charitable and social opportunities in the City of London and argued that gender balance on boards encourages better leadership and governance. At St Stephen Walbrook, we wish to work more fully with a range of organisations in the City to celebrate and encourage greater diversity.

In Christ's Church and kingdom there should be no gender divide in how we serve and follow him. So, like Martha, each of us (male and female) can practise and value the ministries of welcome, hospitality and service of all and, like Mary, each of us (female and male) can practise and value making Jesus the central focus of our lives and learning as his disciples.

Prayer

Fathering and mothering God, you have given all peoples one common origin. It is your will that they be gathered together as one family in yourself. Fill the hearts of humankind with the fire of your love and with the desire to ensure justice for all. By sharing the good things you give us, may we secure an equality for all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. May there be an end to division, strife and war. May there be a dawning of a truly human society built on love and peace.

May we choose the better part and sit at your feet as your disciple.

Loving God, you hold us in your hands for we are all made in your image. Help us to celebrate our differences. Help us to use our diversity to share with each other the richness of our many cultures, languages and backgrounds. Challenge us again lest we wither and perish, by holding to the familiar when it has lost its savour. Help us to dissolve the barriers of difference and work for a just society in

which none are despised and discriminated against on the basis of false divisions and in which each is valued for their true humanity.

May we choose the better part and sit at your feet as your disciple.

Living God, we pray for your holy people and for the Church. We ask that every member may be freed to serve you in truth and grace. You have visited us through women who have been filled with your Spirit. You have blessed us all with dreams for a common future and gifts for a common life, in all things keep us faithful to the message of your gospel, that as women and men we may together bear witness to your love in Christ Jesus. As your daughters and sons, may we be brought nearer to a new vision of your love.

May we choose the better part and sit at your feet as your disciple.

Blessing

Sharing the good things you give us, dissolving barriers of difference, securing equality, working for a just society, serving you in truth and grace, sitting at your feet as your disciple. May the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

July 2016