

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he 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."

REFLECTION 1: HOSPITALITY – A CLASH OF TEMPERMENTS

It would be hard to find a more vivid character drawing with a greater economy of words than we find in today's Gospel (Luke 10: 38-42). So, let us remind ourselves briefly of what was said. Martha, burdened with serving, came to Jesus and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me'. Jesus said in reply, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things, there is need for only one thing, Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her'.

Sibling rivalry is universal and often one of the siblings implores a trusted friend to resolve the dispute. Such is the case in today's Gospel. Martha and Mary have radically different definitions of hospitality. For Martha hospitality demands service, while Mary defines hospitality as presence. Some people are dynamos of activity, while others are naturally quiet, and it is hard for the active person to understand the person who sits and contemplates. There is no right or wrong in this, as God did not make everyone alike. One poet put it nicely,

Lord of all pots and pans and things.
Since I have no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things
Or watching late with thee,
Or dreaming in the dawn light,
Or storming heaven's gates
Make me a saint by getting meals
And washing up the plates.

God needs his Marys and his Marthas too – both are serving God. Jesus clearly sided with Mary's choice of presence, chiding Martha about her anxious and worried nature.

Martha and Mary are not the only ones debating the virtues of service and contemplation. Church history is filled with conflicting views about which way is best. For centuries contemplative religious life was seen as the best way to serve God. Then active religious communities founded by saintly people such as Nano Nagle and Don Bosco offered another choice. Finally, Vatican II proclaimed a universal call to holiness, stating that all states in life are of equal importance. Our call is not in question, how we live out our call is the issue.

Think where Jesus was going when this row broke out. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die. His whole being was taken up with the intensity of the inner battle to bend his will to that of the Father.

When Jesus came to that home in Bethany it was a great day; and Martha was eager to celebrate it by laying on the best she could provide. So, she rushed and fussed and cooked and that is precisely what Jesus did not want. All he wanted was quiet, to find an oasis of calm away from the demanding crowds if only for an hour or two; and that is what Mary gave him and what Martha in her kindness, did her best to forego. 'One thing is necessary' – quite possibly this means, 'I don't want a big spread; one course, the simplest meal is all I want'. It was a case where Mary understood, and Martha did not.

If we are trying to be kind, the first necessity is to try to see into the heart of the person we want to help – and then to forget all our own plans and to think only of what he or she needs. Jesus loved Martha and Martha loved Jesus, but when Martha set out to be kind, it had to be her own way of being kind. Jesus also loved Mary and Mary loved Jesus, but Mary understood. Once we know and love our Saviour, then our service rises up from a holy place within us. In a few words, Faith, Hope, Love and Hospitality saves us.

REFLECTION 2: WORK AND PRAYER

This story is told about a young monk who had questions about his Order's motto: 'pray and work'. One day the abbot invited him to row across the lake with him. The abbot rowed first, but with one oar. As a result, the boat went in circles making no progress. The young monk said, 'Abbot, unless you row with both oars you won't get anywhere'. The abbot replied, 'You are so right son - the right oar is prayer and the left one is work and unless you pull them together, you just go around in circles!'

Today's Gospel (Lc. 10: 38) illustrates for us a clash of temperaments. As we know, some people are naturally dynamos of activity, while others are naturally quiet. It is difficult for the active person to sympathise with the one who merely sits and contemplates while the meditative one can find the active one disturbing. There is no right or wrong in this - God did not make us all alike - both are serving God in their own individual way, the Divine One needs his Marys and Marthas. Like the abbot's observation, prayer and work must go together, otherwise we live in circles.

Think of where Jesus was going when the incident in today's Gospel took place. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die. His whole being was taken up with the intensity of the inner battle to bend his will towards that of the heavenly father. When Jesus came to the home in Bethany, it was a great day, and Martha was eager to celebrate it by laying on the best the home could provide. She may have felt obliged to feed Jesus' disciples who were probably in the vicinity. So Martha, rushed and fussed and cooked and that was precisely what Jesus did not want. So he told Martha to make it simple - only a few things would be necessary for the meal. After all Jesus had turned aside to Bethany to find an oasis of calm away from the demanding crowds if only for a few hours and that is what Mary gave him as she positioned herself like a disciple at Jesus' feet hanging on to his every word. Mary was learning that life comes not from bread alone but from every word that comes from the mouth of God. There could also be a hint here of sibling rivalry, Mary was getting the Lord's full attention while Martha was feeling the pressure.

So often we want to be kind to people - but we want to be kind to them in our own way and it can sometimes happen that our way is not the necessary way. We can take offence and think we are not appreciated. If we are trying to be kind the first necessity is to see into the heart of the person we desire to help - to think and talk in terms of that other person's interests and forget our own plans.

Jesus loved Martha and Martha loved Jesus, but when Martha set out to be kind it was on her own terms. Jesus loved Mary and Mary loved Jesus and Mary understood.