

# Sermon for 5th Sunday after Trinity

## St Thomas, Exeter

17th July 2022  
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Gen. 18.1–10a  
Col. 1.15–28  
*Luke 10.38–42*

May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*....and so, in studying this simple domestic scene, we see that we should not be Marthas, distracted by the pointless minutiae of meaningless work, but rather be Marys, pleased just to sit at the Lord's feet in devotion and prayer. Amen.*

OK. Hands up who's heard that sermon before? I definitely have, several times. And, frankly, I think it's a terrible one. One of the big problems with that idea is that it tends to leave those who do lots of the vital, behind the scenes work in our church communities feeling even less valued than they already do, and it puts more emphasis on the righteousness of those with more obviously 'spiritual' vocations, which (no offence to the clergy present) I think is also a terrible idea. And there are also some more fundamental reasons why I think this is a bad way to approach this text, as I will try to show.

So, this morning, I'm going to try to convince you that we don't have to read this story as a condemnation of Martha and her preoccupation with work and a contrasting endorsement of Mary and her serene, contemplative devotion. For one thing, Luke has only just finished telling his readers that Jesus taught that right love of God and neighbour means not pitting one against the other—that the priest and Levite, who chose to preserve the cleanliness they needed to appear before the LORD rather than help someone in need, misunderstood the nature of worship. And thematic links between the two stories also show continuity.

Just as the man who was robbed on a dangerous road had to rely on the generosity and compassion of a true neighbour, so here, in the following verses, Jesus and his disciples have to rely on their neighbours as they travel. Verse 38 tells us they set off on their way and were then received by Martha, and welcomed into her house. In doing so, Martha becomes the 'child' or 'person of peace' (in Greek *huios irēnēs*), that Jesus told the seventy followers who he sent out at the beginning of Luke Ch.10 to seek out and to rely on for support (Lk.10.6). In the context of the chapter, Martha is righteous.

When Jesus comes in and sits down, Martha's sister Mary sits at his feet—she instinctively puts herself in the position of a student in relation to a teacher. In other words, Mary is a disciple—one of many women disciples that we know followed Jesus despite the efforts of some prominent figures in the early Church to marginalise women's roles or to deny their involvement in the Jesus movement altogether. And the same is true of Martha; she would also sit and learn were she not being *periespato* literally 'dragged away' in Greek by the demands of her hospitality—her service, her '*diakonan*', her deaconing—presumably the provision of water for washing and drinking and the preparation of food.

Martha is grumpy with Jesus that it doesn't seem to bother him that Mary gets to sit and be taught while she has to do the work—"tell her then to help me" she demands of him. But does Jesus really condemn her in reply? "Martha, Martha", he repeats her name as a friend showing concern—"you are anxious and troubled". The NRSV's use of 'distracted' both here and to describe what keeps Martha from Jesus in the previous verse (v.40) is unhelpful as it makes it look like there is a parallel that is not actually there. Jesus does not seem to be referring to Martha's work at all, but rather to her state of mind. Jesus reassures her, and

notes that “only one thing is necessary” or in some manuscripts “only *a few things* are necessary”, and that, as such, Mary has chosen the good part, or the right part. So rather than chiding Mary as Martha had asked him to, Jesus praises her. Martha’s hospitality is righteous, but Mary is not lazy—she did a good thing too.

Jesus slips here into something reminiscent of his apocalyptic mode, in which he often emphasizes that his disciples should not be afraid or anxious about practical realities but focus instead on the cosmic importance of their mission. Don’t worry about what you’ll eat, God will provide; leave your families and jobs and follow me; let the dead bury their dead; etc. Whatever their value to the original audience, these sayings rarely if ever offer us practical advice to take literally.

I think John’s Gospel helps us out here where John chooses to combine this story with the story Luke tells in Ch.7 of a woman who anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive oil. John makes the devoted woman Mary, and he records Judas complaining that she’d wasted a resource that could have been sold to help the poor. Jesus’ reply, “the poor will always be with you, but I will not”, is one of the easiest lines in the New Testament to misunderstand.

For a start, when he says this Jesus is referencing a passage his hearers would have known from the Torah—in particular the clear instructions in Deuteronomy to look after those who find themselves unable to meet their needs. “If there is among you in your community anyone in need”, Deuteronomy 15.7 instructs, “do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour.” The passage commends willingly lending enough to meet people’s needs, even if the debt jubilee is not far off, and giving generously to those who don’t have enough. The message is summarised in v.11: “since there will never cease to be the needy on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land’”. So the recognition of the ever-presence of the poor is not a reason to ignore them, rather it establishes a basic norm of always providing for them.

So, there’s no way that, when John’s Jesus reminds the disciples of this passage in response to Mary’s offering of oil, he means that they shouldn’t work to meet the needs of the needy—quite the opposite in fact. Caring for the poor is not the exception, Jesus reminds his disciples, but the rule. And I think we do well to apply a similar logic to the issue of care of neighbour in Luke’s version of the story. Given the context, Jesus can’t be implying to Martha that her work of hospitality is unnecessary, or that true disciples should avoid practical service of others in favour of worshipful devotion to God. So what then *should* we take from this story that helps us?

Certainly, the stakes of our interpretation here are high. I read yesterday that a major poverty charity has estimated that, within 12 months, 80% of UK households could be in danger of not being able to pay their bills. That is shocking. And addressing this crisis seems a long way down the priorities of those contending to be our next Prime Minister. This community, like many, is surely going to feel that squeeze keenly.

For me, the key message is that like the Samaritan, like Martha, we must love, and welcome, and serve those of our neighbours who are in need and give to them with open hands. Not necessarily our money—we might not have much of that ourselves—but our time, our effort, our service. But, that task of hospitality, of generosity, of love of neighbour in need, that work will always be with us. So also, like Mary, we should make sure to take what chances we get to attend to Jesus, to sit at his feet in devotion, to learn more of his gospel. If we do both types of work, together, dividing the labour equally according to ability and giving according to need, then we will surely see that these two are the same work—love of God and love of neighbour—and we will truly do good for our community. Souls and bodies; living sacrifices.

Amen.

