

Reflections on Synodality: Martha and Mary, Speaking and Listening, Action and Contemplation

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(Luke10:38-42)

At the Home of Martha and Mary

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one.^[a] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

We may be familiar with the story of Martha and Mary and how it is usually used to teach us to prioritise spending time with Jesus over getting caught up in our busyness. It can be confusing to see Jesus appear to admonish Martha, because we know that there will always be service needed and somebody who is willing to do the work and put in the effort. Yet Jesus, when we look closer, admonishes Martha only for being worried and upset, he does not criticise her service nor does he take her to task for being cranky and rebuking him for keeping Mary from helping her. On the other hand Mary is more than welcome to sit at the feet of Jesus with the apostles and more than likely her brother Lazarus, to learn from Jesus. This was unheard of for women in those days even for very good friends of a rabbi. Jesus says in fact that "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her". Those words of Jesus carry weight.

In many ways this is an extraordinary story. Martha appears to be head of this household so perhaps is older than her siblings. She is unbothered by her brother arriving home with their friend Jesus and all his disciples. She must have had the means to feed such a big group and the genuine gift of hospitality to do so. However, like any woman who has had surprise visitors and little help Martha gets flustered. How close she must be to Jesus to be able to tell him exactly how she feels. Like Jacob wrestling with God or the reluctance of Moses to go speak to Pharaoh on God's behalf, voicing her concerns and frustrations came naturally to Martha and were received by the Lord. Mary on the other hand is unfazed by the crowd of men her brother has brought home and sits among them as an equal to be with Jesus.

There is love and trust there and the confidence that she is worthy and will not be turned away. Being welcomed by Jesus perhaps made Mary oblivious to the practicalities of dealing with so many guests, but also relieved her from Martha's demands for help. I'm sure in the moment somebody jumped up to set the table, but maybe not the usual person or the one we would expect.

I'm struck by different people speaking and listening in this gospel extract. We hear Martha and Jesus speak, she impetuous and demanding, Jesus calm and unoffended but nonetheless authoritative. Mary's silence is perhaps louder than we first perceive. She stayed where she was without feeling the need to validate her presence or seek permission and was not swayed by her cross sister. Respectful silence is not necessarily meek or impotent. The disciples too remain silent, surely Peter of all people had an opinion? There is a time and a place to speak it seems.

While it is true that service should flow out of our relationship with Jesus, contemplation and action are each important and necessary. Contemplation and action may not go hand in hand in every endeavour but rooting our actions in a response to the gospel and invoking the Holy Spirit in prayer before we begin will surely set us on the right path. There is an old folk song which says, "All God's creatures have a place in the choir". St Paul writes that "There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done but always to the same Lord" (1 Cor 12:4-5). The process of 'Synodality' will require us to hold a lot of things in tension as the people of God, on a road previously untrodden by the Laity. There is space being created for new voices, it is an opportunity not to be wasted. To dream of a Church that is one of shared fellowship, inclusion and hospitality giving living witness like the honest faith we see in this gospel, yet not sugar-coating real human difficulties is not such an unrealistic dream, is it?

Some questions:

Do we have our priorities right?

Are we worried and anxious about many things like Martha? Does anyone in authority notice or care about these worries?

Like Mary do we long to sit with Jesus and spend time in his presence? What will sitting with Jesus and learning from him motivate in us?

Can we speak calmly about our frustrations? Can we speak enthusiastically about that which inspires us?

Can we listen actively and respectfully?

How are we to balance contemplation and action?

Who is called to service and what form does it take?

Let us pray,

Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us,

Melt us, mould us, fill us , use us.

Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us. Amen.