

Don't you care?

Amos 8:1–12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15–29; Luke 10:34–42

Mary and Martha – such a familiar story. So much has been said about it and we feel we know it well. It seems surprising that it is only 5 verses. Today I would like to share just one way of looking at this story.

Martha has a dominant role in this story and in the picture it gives of domestic life in this household. Martha opens her home to Jesus and his disciples. She is also the one who ran to greet Jesus when Lazarus had died. She is likely the elder daughter and mistress of the house. She is certainly one who makes decisions, takes action, takes control. She opened the door of her home. It is her home. She is the decision maker, the one who knows how things should be done, especially when there are guests. Jesus and his disciples would have been important guests. Jesus was a close friend of the family as well as a famous man. John's gospel tells us that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. We will come back to that loving relationship.

Mary is a listener. She also makes decisions and her first priority is to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him. Sitting at Jesus' feet and listening meant more than spending some pleasant time together. To sit at Jesus' feet and listen to what he said meant being a disciple. Here listening means more than simply hearing with your ears. To listen is to understand, to take deeply into yourself, to be committed to, to respond to.

When we spend time in prayer and study of the scriptures, we are listening, we are being disciples, seeking to understand and to respond to Jesus.

We are all people who get things done, and we are also listening disciples.

Martha is distracted. She would also like to sit at Jesus feet and hear what he says, but there are things that must be done. How can these guests be honoured, shown hospitality and valued if the work is not done? The need to do these things not for her, but for Jesus and her other guests.

However, her first words to Jesus are not about the work or even about Mary but about Jesus' relationship with her. *Lord, don't you care?* What is she saying? For me, it seems as if Martha is asking, *Do you care about me? Do you love me? Do you appreciate me? I am trying to show how I care about you. Do you care about me?*

Martha then pushes a little harder by denigrating what Mary is doing. Mary was described as sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. Is that how Martha describes her? No. Martha focuses on what Mary is not doing. *She has left me to do all the work by myself.*

I would suggest that Martha is still not talking about Mary but about whether Jesus cares for her. The complaint about Mary is part of the *Don't you care?* question and the words she chooses can obscure the real core of the question.

There's more to come. Do you remember when Jesus asked Peter, *Do you love me?* And the answer *Lord, you know that I love you* was not enough. Jesus tells Peter to feed and tend his flock. Love shows itself in action.

Martha shows her love for Jesus in action and busyness. She knows that Jesus loves her but she looks to Jesus for action based in love – action that shows Jesus' love but does it her way. *Tell my sister to help me!*

There is no indication that Mary never helps or that Martha never listens. They are not the non-helper and the non-listener. The story is about this instance, not about their lifelong characters.

I will risk serious embarrassment by telling you about my Martha moment.

A long time ago I was at a seminar day with the staff of the school where I worked. During the morning I began having chest pains. They persisted and eventually I felt that I needed to go for an immediate medical check. I let my Principal know what was happening and I left. I spent the whole of the remainder of that day in pain and in fear that I was having a heart attack. I had a whole series of tests and an eventual diagnosis that this was a viral problem and I was not about to die.

The next day I was back at school. No-one said anything to me. I felt that no-one cared that I had been ill and frightened. I could have talked about my pain and fear, and eventual relief. But no, I didn't do that logical thing.

Instead, in my stress and hurt I reacted irrationally and emotionally. I commented on missing the arranged catered lunch. This was not a planned response. I knew at the time it was irrational, inappropriate and entirely beside the point, but I could not bring myself to talk about the real problem.

Did I get the response I needed? No, of course I didn't. Like Martha, I was asking *Don't you care? What answer did I get? The Principal said Lunch was a group arrangement so you can't get a refund. Other staff members said, Weren't you there? We didn't notice.*

They answered the question they heard but not the question I needed to have answered.

Jesus answered the question Martha asked him, but in a very different way.

Martha, Martha, he said, you are worried and upset about many things.

Martha, Martha is an indication of caring – a soothing, a calming, a gentle correcting.

Jesus does not say that Martha is upset about Mary, but that she is worried and upset about many things. *But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.*

Mary has chosen. She was not compelled either by a particular person or by social convention. Martha seeks to negate Mary's choice rather than making her own. When we feel sorry for ourselves, we can often feel as if we have no choice, but our God is a God of freedom. "Choose life" is a modern catchcry but Deuteronomy Chapter 30 says Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. (Deut. 30:19b-20a)

Mary's choice was what Martha complains about, but Jesus recognised that it was just one of the many things that were worrying and upsetting her.

What could those other things be? The preparations, certainly, but also *Don't you care?*

Martha and her household have a long-term relationship with Jesus. She knows in her heart that she is loved. She just needs to accept that love, to make the better choice, to sit at the feet of Jesus. Jesus is not scolding Martha but inviting her to also make that better choice.

We are also often worried and upset by many things. Life is full of distractions. Like Martha we can even get caught up in excessive busyness in the service of Jesus instead of actually spending time with Jesus.

So when we find ourselves stressed out, when we find ourselves upset with others for not doing their share, when we wonder whether the work will ever get done, we need to stop.

Only one thing is needed. We also can make a better choice and sit at the feet of Jesus.