

‘Mary and Martha’ – A Homily by Fr James

Luke 10.38-end

Jesus had already taken to the road by the time we meet him today in the house of Martha with her sister Mary. In the gospel text shortly beforehand, he had been transfigured before Peter, James and John, and then Luke described how “when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). So after the blinding clarity of his Transfiguration, Jesus embarked on the journey to his destiny, and all that happens in these chapters of Luke’s gospel, right up to his triumphal entry into the Holy City in chapter 19, is framed by a growing sense of movement as he travels the road toward the passion, death and resurrection that he will accomplish there.

Right now, in these chapters, Jesus calls those around him to discipleship: he sends the 72 out and they return rejoicing; he spars with a lawyer about what discipleship means, and as we heard last week, he schools him with the story of the good Samaritan; and today he is welcomed into Martha’s home.

Luke’s preoccupation here is with discipleship: what is the measure of a disciple? How to become one? How does a disciple to act? What are the privileges of being one? The cartoon version of the story we have just heard is that the “better part” for the disciple is to sit at Jesus’ feet absorbing his teaching: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

I have often felt that Martha is a little hard done by, after all, people have to eat, too, and someone has to welcome the guest and make things ready. But there is more going on here than Jesus taking sides in a disagreement between sisters, and even Mary’s passive act is radical for its time. In fact, the whole episode is a direct challenge to the gender roles and norms of the day. Firstly, Jesus shatters convention by being in the house of two women to whom he is unrelated. Secondly, Martha waits on him without a man supervising.

Think about how it was with Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament reading: Abraham welcomed the guests and he ran to Sarah and the servant and told them what to do. Then he presented the food and drink to the three visitors while Sarah stayed behind, in the tent. That's how things were done. In the gospel story, there is no man to welcome Jesus into the house. John's gospel mentions their brother Lazarus, but he makes no appearance here.

The third breach is in Mary's sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching. Conventionally, only male disciples sat at their master's feet at that time.

So whatever they are doing – the active householder Martha, or Mary who sits and listens – at the very least they are, for Jesus' sake, re-writing convention, which must surely be another sign of discipleship.

The world beyond discipleship – the world in which we live – requires us to strive and to compete, to build ourselves up by putting the other down. And to stay busy with the next new thing, the latest scandal, the biggest news. Today we see Luke's portrayal of a different way of being: the generosity of Martha's hospitality that cannot be repaid – Jesus is, after all, a pauper – and the longing for wisdom that brings Mary simply to stop, to sit and to listen. Remember, at the Transfiguration, the voice came from the cloud and said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (9:35).

To show hospitality; to stop and listen for wisdom. This tiny vignette of Jesus' life and teaching, this pause and rest on the road up to Jerusalem, tells us much about how his followers are called to be. In the week ahead, may we, too, find our way do the same.