

## Spirituality of Martha and Mary

Who here today would classify themselves as a Mary, who would say they were a Martha. Why? Today's gospel is one of those passages most of us know, and it is one over which there has been much debate and even ill feeling. It can be used (or misused) to praise or condemn those who either sit and contemplate or who are busy doing..... And believe me, it doesn't matter which camp you are in, it can be used to both praise and condemn. It may seem there can be no right actions, no matter which way you go, it sometimes seems you took the wrong side. But I would like to look at our reading today from a different perspective. I would like to look at the spirituality of the reading rather than just the two sides most of us see in it.

A healthy spirituality requires us to hold many things in a delicate balance, and then try to navigate our way through our lives without falling off the narrow beam on which we are walking. To maintain our spiritual health, we are asked to hold things in tension.

The first obvious tension we see in today's reading is the one between prayer and action. Martha busies herself preparing food for her guests, a necessary task. After all, they did need to eat, and someone needed to prepare the food; 'dial a cafe' wasn't available. But Mary just sits, doing nothing, but loving a lot. Jesus commends Mary for what she has chosen to do. And therein lies the difficulty for Christian spirituality. Is prayer really more important than active service? After all, last week, when Jesus was talking about the Good Samaritan, he told those with him to 'go and do likewise'; go; do; so why is it wrong to do this time? But a healthy spirituality is not a matter of choosing to be either Martha or Mary, but choosing to be both Martha and Mary, choosing contemplation and action, loving and doing, prayer and service, private morality and social justice.

The next tension we see in our reading is one between the domestic and the monastic. Do we find God more easily in the church or in the kitchen, in a monastery or in our daily lives, at a shrine or at Suncorp Stadium? Christians believe that God is both Holy God of transcendence, the supreme, unknowable God above and independent of the world, and also Holy God of Immanence, God who remains within us all. God is found both in the monastery and in our daily lives, in the world and the church. By virtue of our Baptism, our life is oriented toward God and the world. We are mystical and contemplative lovers of God and persons who love and care for the world enough to be actively involved in bringing it closer to God because the world is God's. A healthy spiritual life keeps a strong respect for both.

Then there is the tension between duty and fulfilment. Which is the higher calling? Are we being called to use to the fullest extent our God given talents, or to serve others? Which call has the highest pull on us, the call of family, country and church or the call which emanates from within our being, from within that place which yearns for the deeply personal in love art, and achievement,. There is an old saying, one by which my late father-in-law modelled his whole life – God first, others second, self last. It is a saying which I find difficult to accept on face value. I am not suggesting it is wrong, but sometimes living according to it causes me to question the motives and reasons for my life decisions. Does it always imply duty over fulfilment? How do we put self last and still embrace the God given talents we possess. Again, that narrow beam, that tight rope is walked as we keep both duty and fulfilment in delicate balance.

We also see in our reading a tension between this world and the next. Which perspective do we use when making our decisions, the length of an earthly life, or the vision of eternal life? How much do I have to sacrifice here, today, on earth now, in order that I may still have eternal life? Is life a sea of tears or an ocean of opportunity? The Christian view is that it is both. When Jesus said 'I have come so that you may have life', he was talking about both life after birth and life after death.

There is also a tension between intellect and will. Is the head or the heart more important? Which one do we allow to guide our lives? What is the basis for our feelings, thoughts, decisions? Is insight or love more valuable? A healthy spirituality demands both head and heart, rational and emotional, thought and feeling.

Finally, we are faced with the tension between community and individuality. Are we placed here on earth to fulfil a personal vocation or a communitarian vocation? Can my personal freedom be sacrificed for the good of the group or is the common good less important than my personal freedom. Again, we find ourselves walking that fine line. A healthy spiritual life refuses to sacrifice the one for the many even as it asserts that we are essentially communitarian and our obligations to the community are non-negotiable. It is here that we are faced with the issue of social responsibility. Is it proper that I become involved in discussion and action to fight for the rights of the down trodden, the marginalised, those who seek protection from unjust regimes, even if it threatens the security and safety of my individuality. Is it right to fight for refugees and asylum seekers because then my quiet safe life may be threatened. We see in our reading from Amos, some answers to this dilemma. Now admittedly the reference to summer fruits is a little confusing, until we see the play on words. The Hebrew word for summer fruits and the word for the end are very similar, so if we substitute 'the end' where we see summer fruits, we see God showing Amos 'the end'. God has come to the end of tolerating the people of Israel's unjust ways, their taking advantage of the vulnerable and powerless. The reading tells us the vulnerable are being discarded and crushed, the holy days are seen only as a hindrance to economic opportunity and even the sweepings on the floor, which rightly belong to the poor, are being sold. The people of Israel have ignored God's word, so now they will no longer hear it. Are we any better? Are we hearing the call to become involved in the many issues of social responsibility in our community today? Are we able to listen contemplatively at the feet of Jesus, or is the buzz of society drowning him out? Can we hear God's call for justice today? The tightrope is becoming very tense and unstable, but we still are called to walk it.

Action and contemplation; monastic and domestic; duty and self-actualization; this life and the next; will and intellect; individuality and community, all these are necessary if we hope to play our role in the myriad of circumstances demanded by our lives.

As Mary sat at Jesus' feet, in that contemplative listening, there was an intimate and deeply profound encounter with the Lord which produced a radical change, a transformation in the life of Mary and all around her. As we gather and listen to the words of Jesus, are we ready for a life changing event, are we ready to submit to a summons to a transformation of our lives? Jesus' hospitality to Mary, in including her in his gathering, shows that in God's community there is no inequality, no discrimination, or elitism. The community of Christ is called to overcome racial, cultural, sexual, political and class distinctions and discrimination. We are told by Luke that in our meeting the Lord, as we find ourselves sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to the Word and dining at

the Lord's table, there is a costly demand for us to enter places in our society, in the Church where we will be called to challenge and transform political, cultural, social, economic and even spiritual relationships that marginalise groups. Christian discipleship entails the profound risk of being sent to proclaim God's radical hospitality in places we would prefer not to be, in places where we will face hostility, where we will be called upon to practice God's radical hospitality. As we sit at the feet of Jesus, we are required, commanded, to transform our relationships with the people around us so that justice is maintained, and discrimination and hierarchical relationships torn down.

This fine line we walk between action and contemplation; between offering ourselves in service and being passive and receptive, available to God's deep emotions within us, are all part of the rhythm of life, part of being fully human. They are part of the breathing out and breathing in of our lives, the giving and receiving which is part of the wholeness God seeks to work in our hearts. Let us embrace the Martha and the Mary within all of us, welcome them as essential dimensions of ourselves, and may we be drawn out of ourselves into deeper union with God in Christ, both in service and contemplation.

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