

Devotion or Spirituality: Where Do You Stand?

By Anand Peter

In a society that has become one of round-the-clock work and service — where the line between the workplace and the home has been all but erased, with working from home increasingly the norm; where the world continues to shrink in terms of reach and access; and where, political leaders willing, geographical boundaries themselves seem to be vanishing — where do you stand: with the hard-working, devoted Martha, or with the spiritually inclined Mary? The Biblical incident behind this question is found in a short passage in Luke 10:38-42.

Bible scholars and commentators have taken sides, one way or the other, for centuries. Some see Mary as a model of the contemplative life, so much so that she has become something of a favourite among those inclined toward feminist readings of Scripture today, held up as a role model for women pursuing theological education and ministry.

Since Jesus Himself commends Mary, we, too, must take a side. We tend to echo Martha's complaint against her sister, and to look for reasons to justify it. Left to ourselves, we might almost have preferred Jesus to answer, "Mary, I think Martha has a point — why do you not help her with the work? We have all the time in the world to continue our discussion of spiritual matters." Such a reply would have suited our own present attitude toward ministry and service rather well. But the mind of Jesus runs in quite the opposite direction. Instead, He said, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

The question before us, then, is this: is Martha a model of activism, and Mary a meek contemplative, or perhaps a bold learner? Should we even think of the two of them as though they were rivals? I would rather see them as two halves of an ideal woman. Remember, too, that though Jesus commended Mary, He did not reprimand Martha.

There are believers whose whole interest lies in mission, outreach, and evangelism, whose thinking revolves around intensity, self-sacrifice, and self-denial. Yet Scripture moves, quite naturally, from that world into this one. Our choice of spirituality is nowhere condemned in the Gospels; only our sinful ways are. In this passage, the emphasis falls upon the theme of service, and we do well to remember that Christian service belongs not only to missionaries and the ordained, but to ordinary people, housewives, students, and elders alike. The lessons this passage teaches, then, are lessons we all desperately need — the Christian community as a whole, and each of us, and you, too. The passage sets before us a single demand: the serving of the Lord Jesus Christ. "One thing is needful" for the one who would serve Christ.

Martha played hostess in the home that had been opened to Jesus, and showed, in doing so, a fine sense of the duty of Christian hospitality; there is nothing amiss in what she did. From the time of Abraham, Scripture honours those who are hospitable — by such hospitality, we may even entertain angels

unawares. Paul exhorts the Romans to pursue hospitality, and Peter exhorts his own readers to show hospitality to one another without grumbling. Hospitality has always carried evangelistic weight: the early Church spread largely through house churches, as believers gathered their friends and neighbours to hear a preacher, or even an apostle, teach. We might do the same — inviting our friends into our homes, telling those from other communities of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, or of His death and resurrection at Easter. There is, too, the simple joy of Christian friendship, expressed whenever we invite one another to share a meal — itself an expression of affection within fellowship.

Jesus accepted hospitality from people such as Peter, Zacchaeus, Levi, and Simon; in welcoming Him into their homes, they advanced the cause of His Kingdom. Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus loved the Lord, and welcomed Him as Saviour into their home. Martha's own actions that day show plainly that she had received Christ into her heart, and no fault can be found in her response to His presence as He came to preach to them of the Kingdom of God.

We read that Martha came to Jesus, saying, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me" (Luke 10:40). Her approach was abrupt — the bluntness, perhaps, of a woman who had failed to catch her sister's attention by any quieter means. Mary sat transfixed, listening to Jesus, and seems to have noticed nothing of what was passing in the kitchen. If Mary did not notice, our Lord surely did, since He knows all things; and if He is the very picture of love and consideration, might He not have shown a little of it to Martha? Some such thought may well have passed through Martha's mind as she brought the matter, bluntly, not to her sister but to her Master.

Have you heard a complaint like this before? Have you heard it often — perhaps even recently? Have you found yourself thinking, or speaking, in the same way? It is little wonder that this attitude has spread so widely through the Christian Church; in every congregation, someone feels themselves overworked, and taken for granted by their fellow believers — worse still, that Jesus Himself seems not to notice how overworked they are. But is there not something amiss in the attitude of this otherwise sincere, overworked woman — and, indeed, in our own?

Two things, in particular, were wrong with Martha's response, sincere as she was. Luke tells us that "Martha was cumbered about much serving" (Luke 10:40) — plainly distracted by the many tasks before her, in her wish to produce a meal that would do credit to Jesus and His companions, in both quantity and quality. Luke also tells us that Martha "had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word" (Luke 10:39) — note the word "also," suggesting that Martha, too, had at first sat at the feet of Jesus, alongside her sister and the others. Both had been listening to our Lord; but Martha, burdened with the task of preparing and serving the meal, had to leave, and so could not hear the whole of His teaching. Her difficulty was that even while she listened, she could not fully profit from the words of the very Preacher of the Sermon on the Mount — no man ever spoke as He did, and He was in her own home, and yet she had to rise and walk away from Him. Something in her heart must have told her that she was missing that "one thing" she truly needed, even as she missed it. Martha had become, in a sense, a slave to the dinner; her chief concern was no longer the glory of God the Son, but the success of the meal she was preparing. Consider how often we, too, have quietly slipped out during a sermon, missing something of real importance simply because our minds were elsewhere.

Secondly, an inexplicable bitterness was growing in Martha's heart. She was, without doubt, a godly woman, and yet something was troubling her deeply; peace had left her. The reason, I think, is that she had begun to serve for the sake of serving — or perhaps, more truly, for her own sake. I have done the very same, and felt just as Martha did. When our ultimate aim shifts away from God the Son, Jesus Christ, and toward the details of our service, or toward the approval we hope to win from fellow believers, we grow disquieted and frustrated, exactly as Martha did — this is what happens whenever our focus moves from Jesus to ourselves. Left unchecked, it draws us, before long, into the politics of church life, and further still from Jesus. What we need to understand clearly is that our Lord does not burden us with the demands of anxious service; He asks, rather, that we hear Him, and live by what we hear.

When Jesus said, "But one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part" (Luke 10:42), He may well have meant that only a few things are truly needed, and that Mary had chosen the better part among them. Few things, indeed, are needed in our lives, especially if we would serve Christ, love God, and love our neighbour — but the most needful of all is the Word of God, which we must take into ourselves.

We need to learn Christian simplicity. There are those elements of worship that God Himself has ordained: the teaching of His word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, praise and worship, and giving to His work. There is, too, a simplicity to be sought in our own way of life, in what we buy and what we wear. Do we have the courage to simplify our lives for Christ's sake, and to set aside our worry over so many other things we think we ought to do? If we do, our focus will remain fixed on the one thing needful — Jesus Christ, who, as our Creator, well knows how to care for all our other needs. We need only Christ. Amen.