

MARTHA AND MARY

Martha is annoyed by Mary

Today's gospel causes some uneasiness. Martha is busy as a hostess. All of a sudden she has a whole group coming over, because Jesus does not travel alone. As a good hostess, shouldn't she serve them something? Why does her sister Mary stay with Jesus and does not come to help? We feel a little embarrassed when the good Martha suddenly goes off the rails, and we disapprove of her bringing it up with Jesus: Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me. Should Martha not turn directly to her sister and not to her guest! And we don't quite understand that Jesus seems to be taking sides with Mary: Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.

Two interpretations of Martha and Mary

This text raises all kinds of questions. How can we read this text? In the past, people have interpreted Martha as the personification of the active life. Mary represents the contemplative life. Action and contemplation were contrasted. Moreover, an order of precedence was indicated: through contemplation one enters a spiritual, higher world, while action takes place in the lower, material world. Such a view is no longer ours, because we can no longer believe in an invisible world separate from the visible world in which we live.

In the past, the figures of Martha and Mary also reflected a contrast between the Old and New Testaments, a contrast between synagogue and church. Martha then stands for the one who seeks righteousness in works, in keeping the law, whereas Mary finds her salvation in faith. Luther says in this context: Martha, your work is to be scorned ... I will recognize no work but the work of Mary, which is faith. We can no longer accept such a contrast between works and faith, between the Old and New Testaments.

The right of Martha and Mary

When we apply a feminist exegesis to this story, we can appreciate both sisters. Martha fulfils the nurturing task that was assigned to women. But she does not accept her fate lightly and thinks that she should not have to do it alone. Her sister Mary has the courage to withdraw from the household and caring tasks that were (and are) naturally assigned to women. She sits at the feet of the teacher, something that was not normal, as women were not allowed to participate in the Torah instruction in those days. Both are therefore contradictory figures because they go against the natural division of roles.

Comments about the attitude of Martha

Yet you cannot deny that Jesus makes reservations about the way in which Martha acts. I would like to highlight a few points here. First of all this: the hospitable reception that she prepares for Jesus and his company is an example of charity. But service is spoiled when it is accompanied by self-pity and annoyance about others. Then service becomes a burden for you and a reproach to others.

Secondly, I would like to draw your attention to Jesus' words: Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. In Luke we find more of this kind of warning. In the parable of the seed we hear Jesus say: As for the part that fell into thorns, this is people who have heard, but as they go on their way they are choked by the worries and riches and pleasures of life and never produce any crops. (Lk 8:14). Furthermore, we read how Jesus warns his hearers that they must take care that their hearts are not dulled by the intoxication and drunkenness and cares of daily life (Lk. 21:3-4). The 'cares of life' are mentioned in the same breath as excess, wealth and intoxication. There is something wrong when 'the cares of life' make the heart of man inaccessible for other, call it 'higher' things. Worrying is fine when you are not completely absorbed in it, when you also have time for other things. Mary is busy with these other things, and Jesus does not want to prevent her from doing so.

Thirdly, I would like to point out that a host's friendship is not just about the guest being served food and drink, but also about the guest being listened to. In the Gospel, Martha honors Jesus by serving him; Mary honors him by listening to him.

Fourthly, I want to make a connection with the first reading from Genesis. This reading can shed light on today's gospel. In both readings, hospitality is mentioned. In the first reading this is offered by Abraham, in the gospel reading by Martha and Mary. In both readings there is also something that the guests have to offer. In the reading from Genesis, it is the promise of a son; in the reading from Luke, it are the words of Jesus.

Finally, I note that today's gospel must be seen in connection with last Sunday's gospel reading. This reading began with a formulation of the core of the Law: You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. (Lk 10:27). This formulation was brought up by a Jewish law scholar and heartily confirmed by Jesus. It was followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan as an illustration of loving one's neighbor. Both things are necessary: love of neighbor in addition to love of God. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the emphasis is on practical love of neighbor. In today's Gospel, the emphasis is, so to speak, on love of God, on listening to his word, which comes to us through Jesus. Mary and Martha symbolize a bipolarity in ourselves. We cannot oppose the two poles - love of God and love of neighbor, contemplation and action - to each other. The two sisters need each other: hearing and acting. Hearing alone is not enough. Also, acting alone is not enough. Hearing incites to action and gives depth to it.

In last Sunday's Gospel of the Good Samaritan, the focus was on practical love of neighbor, a love that was also practiced by Martha. In today's gospel, the emphasis is on Mary as the personification of the love of God. But both forms of love need each other and form an indissoluble unity. The Gospel calls us to identify not only with the listening Mary, but also with her caring sister Martha and the Good Samaritan.