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Martha and Mary:
Rivals or Partners?
A fresh look at
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Martha and Mary: Rivals or Partners? A fresh look at Luke (10:38-42).¹

Luke Macnamara

The visit to the home of Martha and Mary is one of the better-known stories in Luke's Gospel. Mary sits passively by Jesus' feet and is praised, while Martha, weary from her multiple exertions, is left not only to do all the work but also to remonstrate and sulk. This peremptory summary reflects the common assumptions of a superficial reading. The depictions of the sisters through the ages in art often reinforces the distinction. Mary is often portrayed as a religious in a prayerful and attentive poise, while Martha has the full garb of a housewife – apron, keys and giant ladle or wooden spoon – and wears a scowl on her face often accompanied by gesticulating arms. The patristic tradition often elevates Mary as a model of contemplation and either overlooks Martha or cites her as a counter-example. However, popular tradition is more sympathetic to Martha. Many take the side of Martha, and even self-identify as a Martha figure.

A STRIKING PRELUDE

The evangelist Luke is more subtle than might appear at first. The immediately preceding context can, in fact, give readers pause for thought (Luke 10:25-37).² Jesus encounters a lawyer who asks what it is necessary to *do* to gain eternal life. At the end of their dialogue after the parable of the Samaritan, the lawyer identifies the neighbour of the wounded man as the one who *did* act of mercy for him. Jesus concludes the dialogue by telling the lawyer to go and *do* likewise. While it is not said how the lawyer responds, the emphasis on *doing* is clear. Jesus is often identified with the Good Samaritan – a model of loving service. Martha in her loving service is in very good company!

1 This is an amended version of a talk given at a seminar on the “Women in Luke’s Gospel as Portrayed through Story and Art” at Glenstal Abbey on Saturday 7th September 2019.

2 As frequent reference will be made to the Gospel of Luke, henceforth, only the chapter and verse numbers will be used.

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MARTHA AND MARY: RIVALS OR PARTNERS?

The wider context is that Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem, which also doubles as a period of instruction and formation for the disciples. The juxtaposition of the *two episodes* where Jesus emphasises first doing and then hearing suggests that *both* are important. Interestingly, the “doing” precedes the “hearing”, a rhetorical technique called *hysteron proteron* or in English idiom putting the cart before the horse. Hearing usually precedes doing and the unusual order draws readers’ attention to both episodes and the core teaching of each. Shortly after turning towards Jerusalem (9:51), Jesus sends out the seventy disciples (10:1-20). They are to go with no resources (10:4) and to rely on the hospitality of those to whom they are sent. A mixed response to the mission is expected. Some will welcome the disciples into their homes while others will refuse. If they encounter a person who shares in peace, the disciples’ peace will rest on that person, who reveals him or herself to be a child of peace (10:5-6).

MARTHA’S HOSPITALITY

Martha models the positive response spoken of by Jesus and is, therefore, a child of peace: she goes out to meet the visitor as he enters her village and welcomes him into her home (10:38). Interestingly, Jesus is not named in this entire episode (10:38-42). For now, the visitor’s identity is withheld by the storyteller’s use of the personal pronoun “him”. *Martha* models a hospitality to a perfect stranger on the road which expects no return. This is what Jesus asked of the leader of the Pharisees who had invited him to a meal: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (14:12-14) *Martha* emerges as an extremely positive figure of a model disciple. It is worth emphasising at this point that, but for *Martha*, the visitor might never have stopped in the village nor entered her house. The initial instrumental role of *Martha* in welcoming the visitor to her home is a necessary prelude for what follows.

LISTENING AT THE FEET OF THE KYRIOS

Once inside the home, there is a description of the scene. A new character appears who is named *Mary* and is identified as a sister to *Martha*. She is now seated at the feet of the *Kyrios* and is listening to his word. The storyteller refers to the visitor as *Kyrios*, which may denote a common form of polite address such as “mister” or

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may have a more weighty significance such as “Lord”. For the storyteller, it is the latter, but for Mary and Martha it is not yet clear. Readers recognise the gift that Jesus bequeaths in speaking his word and how blessed are those who see him and hear this word (10:23-24). For now, it is not yet clear whether either sister recognises fully who is in their midst.

Mary’s location at the *Kyrios*’ feet is a privileged position for potential disciples in the Gospel: Peter (5:8), the sinful woman (7:35-50), the Gerasene demoniac (8:28, 35), Jairus (8:41), the haemorrhagic woman (8:47), and the Samaritan leper (17:16). Her action of *listening* to the *Kyrios*’ word is a key foundational role for potential disciples (2:46-47, 5:1, 15; 6:18; 7:3, 22, 29; 8:8, 12-15, 18, 21; 9:35; 11:28, 31; 14:35; 15:1). There are a number of missing elements in the story. Nothing is said of the content of the *Kyrios*’ teaching, nor are the present whereabouts of Martha disclosed. The preceding text which speaks of Martha’s welcoming of the *Kyrios* into her home implies more than simply opening the door. The verb “to welcome” implies a constellation of hospitable activities, from meeting the guest’s needs for rest and refreshment to more personal attention such as listening and conversation. All these are implied. The stationary posture of Mary leads some to surmise that Martha must be exclusively engaged in active pursuits, but this is only one of many possible assumptions.³

MARTHA’S SERVICE

The storyteller next notes that Martha is occupied with much service. The NRSV reads “distracted by many tasks”. While this translation both judges and convicts Martha of inattention, the Greek verb has a range of connotations ranging from being properly occupied with an important role to attempting too much at once and getting nothing done. Secondly the “many tasks” replace “much service” which has a much more positive resonance in the Gospel. When the disciples later dispute among themselves as to who is the greatest, Jesus redefines the greatest as the one who serves and points to his own example: “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (20:27) Martha not only serves *like* Jesus but serves much!

3 Interestingly many papyri and manuscripts for 10:39 include an additional relative pronoun which considerably alters the meaning. The text would read: “Mary was also seated at the *Kyrios*’ feet and listening to his word.” This implies that both sisters, Martha and Mary, were seated at the *Kyrios*’ feet. This adds greater complexity to the characterisation of Martha and avoids a *Punch and Judy* stereotyping of the two sisters.

MARTHA AND MARY: RIVALS OR PARTNERS?

MARTHA'S *QUESTION AND REQUEST*

After some time and much service, Martha comes up to the visitor and addresses him as *Kyrios*. Does Martha truly recognise the Lord, or does she use the term *Kyrios* in the weaker sense of an honorific title, such as “mister” or “sir”? The use here is ambiguous. Martha appears to acknowledge that Jesus has authority to adjudicate between her and her sister. Jesus elsewhere does not accept such a role. When someone from the crowd says to him: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus replies, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” (12:13-14) Jesus does not accept the role proposed by the anonymous person in the crowd, and thus is unlikely to accept it now.

Although Martha speaks in the presence of Mary, in her question she fails to mention her name which suggests a certain distance. Mary is referred to only as “my sister”. Martha’s question does not require a response, since she does not wait for one. Her speech suggests that she understands *Kyrios* at the more mundane level of a polite address: “Do you not care that my sister has abandoned me to serve all by myself? Tell her then to help me.” (10:40) This seems a reasonable request from an overworked Martha when she observes her idle sister by Jesus’ feet. Interestingly, no speech of Mary is recorded, and so readers only evaluate the situation from Martha’s point of view. This is reinforced by her use of the personal pronouns: my, me, myself. In addition, the social mores of New Testament times differ little from today with respect to layabouts. Many, then and now, would side with Martha. While that may well be the case, within the wider context of Luke-Acts, Martha’s question may have a deeper meaning. It echoes the dispute over the distribution to the Hebrew and Gentile widows in Acts 6 and the debate concerning service of word and table. The twelve say that: “It is not right that we should *abandon* the word of God in order to *serve* on tables.” (Acts 6:2) Martha’s question takes up the two key verbs (“abandon” and “serve”) of this sentence. The abandonment by Mary obliges Martha to fulfil the table service all by herself. Might Martha be concerned at her inability to perform the service of the word? If this be the case, then she is once again in good company – that of the twelve apostles (Acts 6:2)!

THE *KYRIOS*' RESPONSE

The storyteller reports that the *Kyrios* answers her. Readers are thereby again alerted to the divine identity of the visitor. This connects back to the report of Mary at the *Kyrios*' feet, but more immediately to Martha’s address to Jesus as *Kyrios*. Does this

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reinforce the sense that Martha has got it right, that Jesus is *Kyrios* - Lord, or does it show that her understanding of *Kyrios* falls short of the reality? This is the second time in quick succession and only the fifth time thus far in the Gospel, that Jesus is referred to as *Kyrios* by the storyteller, a statistic that takes on even greater significance since Jesus is only otherwise referred to in this passage by the personal pronouns (he, him, his). Although much speaking and listening has been going on in this home, it is only now that readers get to hear the *Kyrios* speak.

His first words are a double address: "Martha, Martha." Names are important. When one uses a name, it signifies recognition of the other. The unusual duplication of the name hints at both an *intimacy* and an *urgency*, both giving her his full attention and drawing her attention to him. Jesus later uses such a double invocation, when he warns Peter about the imminent events of the passion and reverts to using his original name: "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (22:31-32).

The *Kyrios* recognises Martha's overwrought status: "you are worried and disturbed by much." (10:41) However the mention of service is dropped. Might he be suggesting that Martha is concerned with many things and not the service, or might readers understand service as implicitly included here? The mention that there is need of only one thing is ambiguous in that the referent could also be a form of service. Troublesome worries, that can choke the word, have been raised as a risk in the parable of the sower, but the object of such worries are riches and pleasures. Martha's worries have a different focus. She is intent on providing hospitality to the *Kyrios* and / or getting the help of her sister in providing the hospitality.

The *Kyrios* continues: "Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken from her." (10:42b) Again, names are important. Although she has been spoken about, this is the first time that Mary's name is spoken. Interestingly, while the storyteller reveals the names of both sisters in the preamble to the dialogue, Martha twice (10:38, 40) and Mary once (10:39), it falls to the *Kyrios* to first speak the name of each, again Martha twice and Mary once. Here, the *Kyrios* affirms that Mary has chosen the better *part*, but not the whole. This part cannot be taken from Mary, as she is one who listens well to the word and to what she has more will be added. (8:18) However, there is, implicitly, *another part* for Martha which also will not be taken away. Later, in the parable of the wily steward, the *kyrios* hears reports that his steward was squandering his money and immediately summons him and decides to dismiss him (16:1-2). The *kyrios* of the parable decides based on

hearsay without even discussing the matter with his steward. In contrast, this *Kyrios* knows both Martha and Mary and cannot be confounded by rumours. The *Kyrios*' response to Mary is one of hope for both sisters. *Each* can have a part which will not be taken away.

In the previous episode centred on the parable of the Samaritan (10:25-37), there was no report on how the lawyer responded to Jesus' command to go and do likewise. The story of the *Kyrios* and the two sisters is also left open ended. While it may be presumed that Mary continues to listen to the *Kyrios*' word by his feet, there is no mention of Martha's response. Readers are invited once again to complete the story. Might Martha now listen to the *Kyrios*' word as Mary? Might she reconnect with the foundational relationship of listening to the *Kyrios*' word which is at the basis of all ministry? Listening however is only the first step for discipleship, for becoming part of the *Kyrios*' new family: "My mother and my brothers and sisters are those who *hear* the word of God and *do* it." (8:21) The juxtaposition of the episode with the parable of the Samaritan holds both elements in tension. The story requires completion not only for Martha but also for Mary. Both are no longer simply sisters of each other, but sisters of the *Kyrios*, and as such are invited to hear *and* do. The sisters' house is destined to become a home to the *Kyrios* and his family.

THE ARTISTIC TRADITION

Many paintings depict the story at various moments. Usually they show the contrast of Mary at the *Kyrios*' feet and Martha busy in a kitchen, but often they show the moment of dialogue between Martha and the *Kyrios*. The artistic tradition often conflates this episode with the raising of Lazarus and the anointing by Mary (John 11-12) or conflates the sisters with other women of the New Testament. This is especially the case for Mary who is linked with Mary Magdalene and various sinful women. It appears that the tradition has difficulty in dealing with so many women and so merges them! However, some of these expansions are interesting. Martha moves from being an intercessor on behalf of Mary Magdalene before Christ at her conversion in the painting of Veronese (1545-48) to taking the lead role in turning Mary from her life of pleasure to the life of virtue in Christ in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Mary Magdalene* (1598).

Few artists dare to complete the story. An exception is the *Brick Bible*, a children's bible which displays various scenes of this bible story constructed with Lego. At first Mary is sitting in rapt attention at Jesus' feet while Martha is busy with her housework. Later

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Martha in quite a mood, while Mary remains placid, complains and gesticulates at Jesus. The series ends with Martha sitting alongside Mary, *both* attentive to Jesus as he speaks. While the series ends here, readers of Luke's Gospel intuit that these sisters will both move to the next stage of discipleship and respond actively. They are perhaps among those women who follow Jesus to Jerusalem (23:55), who observe his burial, who go to the tomb to anoint his body (24:1) and among the first to receive news of the resurrection. If so, they are to be included among the group of women who first witnessed the proclamation of the resurrection and in turn announced it to the apostles (24:10). The women's attention to the Lord's word is the fertile soil in which the resurrection can be truly understood and proclaimed. How many Christian homes have wives and mothers grounded in this soil who show their husbands and children the life that Christ brings?

Many modern feminist scholars balk at the idealised portrait of a woman, as one who sits submissively in silence to Jesus' every word. This is exacerbated by the apparent curt dismissal of Martha despite all that she has done. History, sadly, all too often attests to how this story has been abused to belittle women and keep them in their place. Far from silencing women or disempowering them, this subtle episode exerts a subversive function. Mary is in a privileged position and role for a disciple. She knows her place! Martha too fulfils many of the roles of a disciple. The presence of the Lord provokes each sister to respond, one by *listening*, the other by *doing* and so together they fulfil the criteria to become members of the Lord's family (8:21) and their house becomes a home of the Lord. Neither sister gets a raw deal. They are rather models to be imitated by the wider human family.

Self-knowledge. "What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves. The most important of all voyages of discovery." – *Thomas Merton*

– SISTER STAN AND SÍLE WALL, *The Sacred Life of Everything*. 2019. Dublin: Columba Books, p. 89.