

Sunday Homily

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

17 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?
Tell her then to help me.”

Luke 10:40

Illustration

Louisa M. Alcott’s book *Little Women* is essentially a morality tale. But it is told with great liveliness, and it centres around the relationships between four sisters, each of them very different. They do not always get on with each other, but they love and trust each other enough to learn from each other. If they had been more alike in character, the story would have been far less amusing, and there would have been far fewer opportunities for each to grow. Their differences are essential to the plot.

Gospel Teaching

Martha and Mary are clearly very different characters, too, but today’s Gospel reading suggests that the learning is all one-way: Mary is right and Martha is wrong. But probably most of us, particularly, perhaps, the women here today, have a sneaking sense of sympathy for Martha, and a feeling that Jesus is being less than just. After all, somebody has to make preparations for guests, get dinner ready, clean up and so on. We can’t all sit about in a contemplative daze.

This story about Martha and Mary is one that we tend to think we know quite well, only to realise that what we think we know is actually an amalgam of several different stories. We tend to associate Mary with the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume, and who had a brother named Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. But Mark tells us the bare facts that a nameless woman anointed Jesus’ head; Luke says she was a sinner and that she anointed his feet, but still gives no name, and John tells us that Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, but says nothing about her sinfulness. It is also John who tells us about Lazarus.

So let us look with more care at the passage set for us today, and see what it actually says, rather than what we think it does.

It says, for one thing, that this all happens in Martha’s house. There is no mention of any male relative. All Luke’s first readers would have known instantly that this was an example of Jesus’ famed radical stance towards women. He is doing something very daring by being in that house at all, when they are not his family.

But Martha and Mary are also doing something daring by welcoming this man into their home. Their reputations are definitely going to suffer. No wonder Martha is in a bit of a flap: if it is her home, she is the one who has taken the bold decision to invite Jesus in.

If Paul's letters are anything to go by, Luke's first readers, the earliest Christians, would have been meeting in just such homes, and would have been debating whether or not women could be hosts and leaders of their gatherings. Luke, with his well-known interest in women, is suggesting that Jesus set them a precedent here.

Luke goes on to show Jesus specifically commending Mary for sitting at his feet and listening to him. Students might sit at the feet of rabbis to learn, but women didn't. If women were present at all, it was simply to provide food and drink, and to remain quietly out of sight. Once again, for Luke's first readers this would have played into the discussion about women disciples. Were they just here to enable and facilitate the men's vocations, or could they be true disciples themselves? Luke is saying that Jesus has already answered that question.

It is ironic that this vignette of the full participation of women in the mission of Jesus should have turned into a story about a fallen woman and her harassed sister! If we take the context seriously, Jesus' words to Martha are a clear call: women, like men, need to put discipleship above everything else.

Application

And that is surely the point. Like Martha, we are all "worried and distracted by many things". There are so many things that have real claim upon our time and our hearts, where we feel justified in saying with indignation, "We can't all be contemplatives. Someone has to do the work!"

And, of course, that is true. But we must not let our worries and duties mask our real nature, or most important task, which is to be disciples of Jesus.