

# MARY AND MARTHA

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‘But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? ..And Jesus answered and said unto her, 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.’

Martha has not lost her place of honour, however. When Francis was elected Pope, he chose not to occupy the papal apartments, but to remain staying in the residence which had been built to accommodate the cardinals meeting to choose a pope. It is dedicated to Saint Martha; and that is where Pope Francis remains.

Mary and Martha occur in St John's Gospel too. Luke's book was written some time after Matthew's and Mark's, and John's is last of the four. There we meet Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus, and read of Lazarus' illness and death, and his being raised to life, together with Jesus speaking of his own death and his being 'the resurrection and the life.' But over forty verses in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to St John are matched – if that is the word – in the tenth chapter of St Luke's Gospel by five verses only. Luke connects Martha and Mary to the Good Samaritan. The priest and the levite were following regulations about their temple duties, but the Samaritan was following the more important Mosaic law, of loving your neighbour; and Mary is now presented as following the call to love God, to 'listen to the word' of God and his prophets.

The position of women in the culture of the first century is often discussed in comments on the story of Martha and Mary. Turning to Daphne Hampson's *Theology and Feminism*, we read that 'it would seem that the notion that women should only fulfil a domestic role is questioned. Mary is allowed to sit, as at the feet of a rabbi, at Jesus' feet. But.....there is no suggestion that the men should on this occasion do the work of preparing the food. Moreover, what is the picture that we are given? "Mary was hardly being intellectual in any creative way, or initiating any original ideas

of her own, by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening." If the story were to be useful to feminists one would have thought that it would have to show role reversal. It would need to concern on this occasion a man sitting at a woman's feet and learning from her. But that is unthinkable in the context. The story does not even portray a dialogue between two equals. The image we are given simply serves to confirm the picture of teacher and listener given to men and women respectively within a patriarchal order.'

I wonder if two statements about Martha and Mary might be shared by a fair proportion of Christian people – the first, that Jesus was a man of his time, influenced by contemporary culture and assumptions, and the second, that he might have been kinder to Martha, who was, after all, preparing his supper. As regards the second statement, we have to remember that the Gospels are not social reports of a twenty-first century sort, nor biographies, but Gospels, manifestos promoting Christianity.

To follow the first statement, that Jesus was a man of his time, we could readily note that as the centuries of Christian witness have passed, at no time could it be said that the social, political, and general culture had no influence on what the church taught or how it behaved. Equally it could be claimed that there has always been a resistance to any

thoughtless uncritical acceptance of popular culture. Both have been there – the influence of culture, and some resistance to culture.

A minister I know had his first charge in an English rural parish, where the custom was that at Communion the squire came forward, alone, and received, and after she had returned to her place the others came forward. Is that not some evidence of the influence of culture?

Musing on the influence of culture on religion I went back to a book I had read twenty years ago, on '500 years of religion in America' by the Chicago church historian and writer, Martin E Marty, a splendid survey of all the churches and religious activities from Christopher Columbus to Billy Graham; but I was drawn to it in preparation of this sermon by the book's title, Pilgrims in Their Own Land, which seemed to suggest that American Christianity had been influenced, or even determined, by the vision and thrust of the development of the United States. It was therefore with particular pleasure that I rediscovered, printed before the first chapter, this paragraph by Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher who lived and taught in North America in the middle years of the twentieth century.

‘Americans seem to be in their own land as pilgrims, prodded by a dream. They are always on the move – available for new tasks, prepared for the possible loss of what they have. They are not settled, installed...

‘This sense of becoming, this sense of the flux of time and the dominion of time over everything here below, can be interpreted, of course, in merely pragmatist terms. It can turn into a worship of becoming and change. It can develop a cast of mind which, in the intellectual field, would mean a horror of any tradition, the denial of any lasting or supra-temporal value. But such a cast of mind is but a degeneration of the inner mood of which I am speaking. In its genuine significance this American mood seems to me to be close to Christian detachment, to the Christian sense of the impermanence of earthly things. Those now with us must fade away if better ones are to appear.’

Martin Marty covers the building of the Californian missions by Father Junipera, and the spread of church life from Britain, with Baptists scoring as the frontier grew when they could set a local church going without waiting for Bishop or presbytery, the evangelical thrust of early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventist, Mrs Eddy and more. Then toward the end, he quotes the philosopher John Dewey in a matter which to me has been badly neglected - the use of the word ‘God’, or its over-use, or its replacement, when

Dewey wrote, in the 1930s, of his own long struggle with specialized religious belief and his view that the word God should mean nothing more, or nothing less, than the idea that the whole self could be harmonized with the universe.

I don't know if I'd go along with that, but I do suspect we overuse the word God, and therefore heighten the barrier to religious involvement for those who have been told that God is central.

Two things in past years moved me in that direction. The first was the first post-communist Prime Minister of Poland, asked how he would manage, replying, We believe in Providence, and Providence is kind. The other involved a sermon by a theologian of the Orthodox Church from what was then Leningrad, who spoke of the world being made by the Holy Trinity, and employing that and other terms where we would usually say 'God'.

Luke's five short verses concerning Martha and Mary can open a door to a wide consideration of the interplay of culture and faith, from ancient Hebrew times through the development of the church in America to ourselves here today, where compromise and semi-fidelity can daily threaten our loyalty to Christ and his cause; and though we are unlikely in this life to evade or escape the influence of the wider culture in which we live, it may be helpful to bear in mind the risk we run by living as we are.