

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?  
Or: Ministry in conflict?

I confess my heart sank when, having accepted the invitation to lead worship with you, I discovered that the lectionary gospel reading for the day was the few verses of the Lucan Martha & Mary story. But checking the other readings I found Amos 8 was the set OT passage. Excellent. But then came the news that Roots was focussing on Martha & Mary, and the OT passage was the alternative track – Sarah laughing at the news she overheard as she eavesdropped Abraham’s conversations with his male visitors.

But the exercise took me off in unexpected directions, for which I am extremely grateful, and would like to share a little of my journey.

I have real questions about Martha’s story. Simplistic stereotypes of women are not helpful, not least in the Gospel. And here the reprimand of Martha surely is out of order. Immediately prior to the Martha incident comes the Lawyer with his question ‘What must I do?’ This leads on to the story of the Good Samaritan who is valued because he acts on the needs of the man, the neighbour. The priest and the Levite might well have confirmed, under investigation, that they were contemplating God at the time. Jesus, the one who is compassionate about the downtrodden and the outsider, here appears to trample firmly on Martha’s paddy. Surely the Gospel is about hearing and doing. Lk records a dispute about which of the disciples is the greatest, and Jesus responds – *Who is the greater – the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*

I was introduced to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist Catholic theologian, and Krister Stendahl Professor at Harvard Divinity School, by a commentary on Lk 10.38-42 by another feminist Catholic theologian Barbara Reid. ESF suggests that the

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Martha story reflects a struggle centred around the ministerial role of women in Lk's time, rather than a specific incident in the life of Jesus. The use of *κυριε* and *κυριος*, 'Lord', as a title, suggests a post-resurrection setting.

The conflict centres on *διακωνια*, literally 'waiting at table', but takes on the meaning of ministerial service. Clearly women did exercise many different ministries in the early church. Phoebe, at Cenchreae, was *διακονος*; 1 Timothy lists the pre-requisites for women deacons. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.4-5 writes of women and men praying in the assembly for worship. But equally clearly not all recognised the ministry of women. Is it a copyist who has later inserted in 1 Cor. 14.34 that women should keep silent in church, and be subordinate? Paul gives strong support to women teachers like Prisca (Rom. 16.3-5; 1 Cor. 16.19; 2 Tim. 4.19), and yet the author of the pastoral epistles asserts 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.' (1 Tim. 2.12). Of course, this was Eve's fault – Adam wasn't deceived but Eve was!

It is Martha who welcomes Jesus. The word is derived from the word to 'receive', involving hospitality – a vital element in the ancient world, as Abraham shows. The seventy being sent out (earlier in chapter 10) are instructed to eat what is set before them. The same word, *δεχομαι* is used for receiving the word – eg *the Gentiles accepted the word of God* (Acts 11.1). It would seem that Martha welcoming Jesus (inviting?) matches Mary's sitting at his feet listening. They are both receiving Jesus. The conflict arises over the action resulting from it. Is it possible that Martha's complaint to Jesus regards not the volume of work to be done, but

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being allowed to minister. Barbara Reid suggests that Martha is burdened about her tasks, or with reference to them, rather than by them. Her concern is then that she is being denied by those who think she should be leaving the tasks to men. The word 'distracted' in the Greek actually means 'to be pulled or dragged away'! She is being prevented from fulfilling her diaconal ministerial duties. Meanwhile Mary appears to be rewarded for choosing a listening role. (George Caird in his commentary suggests there are many variants in the reply of Jesus, and he suggests Mary is simply being praised for her listening, with no disparagement of Martha's role.)

Barbara Reid goes on to note that the word translated 'troubled', for Martha's state of mind, occurs 11 times in the NT, on each occasion in relation to crowd disturbance – hubbub, tumult (Pilate worried about a riot developing). Either it was a huge paddy Martha was throwing, or there was a great deal of conflict going on in the community – 'the whole community in an uproar'.

It would seem, on this thesis, that there is nothing new in the world two thousand years on. The Church of England is still suffering the strife of seeking to consecrate women bishops. The Roman Catholic Church, and many in close proximity to it, is in uproar over the declaration this week that the ordination of women priests is a 'grave sin' – a sin on a par, apparently, with sex offences against children. I am proud of being a member of a church that has ordained women for approaching 100 yrs – but we haven't got there yet! There are still congregations which would not vote to call a woman as their minister. The Anglican Communion needed a lot of Martha's who were ready to speak out, and received a lot abuse, because they felt called to ministry within the Church.

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Of course we need time to stand back from our labours and reflect. What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare? One of the delights, I find, in getting older is that when I was young I would race up and down mountains and never stop to admire the view, now I have to. Needing to catch the view is getting more and more necessary! But if you spend all your time admiring the view at the first stop, you will never reach the mountain top. To reach the mountain top Martin Luther King needed much time in prayerful contemplation, but also a deep, life-giving, commitment to action for black people.

I haven't mentioned that colossal passage from the epistle – the majestic language of Christ at the centre of the universe, the reconciling Christ, uniting us – Christ in you and in me. We are called, together, to share in the wonder of the world and to acknowledge and support all who share in ministry.

PS. In defence of Martha let us note that in Jn 11-12 she plays a vital role in the raising of Lazarus, and, indeed, makes a profession of faith as profound as Peter does on the road to Caesarea Philippi.