

WEEKLY SERMON

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Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her

My older son is about to leave home for university and I would like to think that he is fully equipped with life skills to survive on his own.

Obviously, he knows how to mix a martini and cook a béchamel sauce, but he can also sew on a button, darn a sock and confidently handle a range of power tools, including drills, electric saws, irons and washing machines!

Alarmingly, this appears to be unusual as national surveys show that most housework is still done by women. This was certainly true at the time of Jesus and is important in how we understand the story of Mary and Martha.

Often, sermons on Mary and Martha describe them as representing two opposing strands within Christianity: Mary is contemplative and prayerful, whereas Martha is active in her service or others.

We can easily deconstruct this apparent opposition with the Rule of St Benedict: 'work and prayer'. As an ordinand many years ago, I delighted in the door between my College chapel and library. On one side it said: 'to work is to pray'. On the other it said: 'to pray is to work'.

Prayer and action are equally part of a life of Christian faith, and completely intertwined with each other.

A different but equally important way of interpreting Mary and Martha is to recognise the significance of their gender.

Otherwise, we overlook that they are female disciples and that a woman sits at Jesus' feet. The shock factor in Mary's contemplative faith is not that someone would sit at Jesus' feet, but that a woman would do this.

Jesus' response is more than supportive: 'Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

First, Jesus empowers her and recognises her as an individual with choice and agency, when few women would have been allowed to make choices about anything.

Second, he affirms her choice. We might compare his words in Matthew and John when the (male) disciples criticise the woman who anoints him: 'Why do you trouble the woman?' and 'Leave her alone'.

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus' concern for those who are marginalised puts them at the centre of his ministry.

If we try to place Mary and Martha in conflict we only demean them further. Whereas Jesus shows us that all people have the power to choose and all are welcome to be his disciples.

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