

Study Twelve: Two Significant Sisters

The Development of Daughters

Perhaps Martha and Mary seems so different that we wonder they could come from the same family. Investigation shows us there is nothing unusual about daughters being different. Today we think we can explain differences by psychological investigation. Primarily we can only really know people by relating and inter-relating to them and not just by observing them. We must also take into account that God makes each person unique and also that He never makes them to be individuals. In relationships we can become what we can be: out of relationships this is impossible. We are given an identity by God (cf. Rev. 2:17; 3:12; cf. 7:3; 14:4; 22:4), especially as we are baptised into Him (Matt. 28:20), and identity relates to vocation and goal (*telos*). We ought not to compare Martha and Mary but see them as sisters and as each having her 'particularity' or 'differentiation' with a view to knowing and serving God and others. The variety of temperaments, dispositions, gifts and talents God gives are for richness in sharing life.

Martha-Woman of Action

The pride women often have in comparing themselves with Martha, although there is no reason why they should, is really a statement by them, such as, 'Action is what counts, and Martha was practical about things'. Martha was, in fact, not all that practical for with her ability was mixed a certain tensions. A truly practical woman is not 'distracted with much serving'. Jesus said, 'Martha, Martha, you are habitually anxious and troubled about many things.' In this there was more than a mild rebuke. Martha seemed not, habitually, to pause to listen and to contemplate: such inner knowledge and richness would have given sweet rich tone to her music of serving. Likewise Martha complained about her sister's seeming indolence. It has been surmised that she too would have liked to have listened, but *she did not*. To have dropped everything may have involved a new approach to life altogether, but was what Jesus really wanted of her. It is not action that counts, but the kind of action that is given. Action is what is called for in these days—all days in fact—but it may be a substitute for deeper, richer action: that of listening to God and hearing His wisdom through the Son.

Mary-Woman of Contemplation

It is all summed up in, 'Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened'. The occasion was rare, the speaker was unique, the teaching was never to be as reach from any other. The Word had become flesh, speaking in the home of the two sisters. Mary had a choice of the two ways, 'Mary has chosen the good portion'. Whatever the figure may have been Mary knew what was the better thing. Jesus said it was better. The words that he spoke were 'spirit and life': what more could any words be? Meditation in the Scriptures is on God, His creation, His law and His works—'the wonderful works of God'. Mary was not simply meditating: she was listening. She was storing up the riches that were coming down from the Father through His Son. 'Never man spoke like this man'. Just as it is not quite true to say that Martha was a woman of action it is not quite correct to say Mary was a woman of contemplation. She was listening to Jesus and what came out of her listening can be seen in the account in John 12 of the event of her anointing Jesus with the 'pure nard'—an ointment often related to death. Jesus made it clear that in some sense Mary knew of his death and was even celebrating it. So far as we know she was the only person of his company who gave such emphasis to his death. Did she know the 3 sayings of Mark 8:32; 9:31 And 10:32, the thrice repeated saying of Jesus in regard to his death?

Martha and Seeing the Glory

The 11th. chapter of John is a strange one. Jesus, on hearing the news of Lazarus illness deliberately refused to go back to see his friend, even though he knew the illness to be terminal. 'Even though he knew the illness to be terminal' — it was not just that. It was "Because he knew the illness was terminal'. There was purpose in Lazarus' death. It was to at the very least to show the glory of God to Martha. Jesus had to get to her 'on the run' -so to speak. Where else would you have ever found Martha? It was to the Martha who said Lazarus would not have died had Jesus been present to whom he spoke the famous words, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes on me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.' We might ask whether Mary had had better words said to her; not that such a question has much meaning. So Jesus took Martha to the very tomb and tested her faith. 'Did I not say that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?' She had said she believed him to be the resurrection and the life, but had she known what she had said. Now she did know! She saw the glory as the tomb was opened and radiant Lazarus was liberated from his late death raiment. Martha would never be the same again.

Two Sisters and the Man of Peace with Them

John 12:1-9 portrays a peaceful time and scene. Mary's love action is in the midst of a meal when Martha's serving is not erratic or attention drawing. 'They made him a supper'. Martha and Mary we suppose. They watched the new Lazarus eat with the Master. Mary celebrated his death with the costly ointment, and fragrance filled with room. 'She has done it to prepare me for my burial', Matthew records. Mark writes it, 'She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for burying'. The story of Mary's act will be told wherever the gospel is told. Martha does not require attention: her victory is her peace in serving. She has seen the glory of God. The two sisters are one, united in the reality and knowledge of that glory- 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'.

Neither Martha Nor Mary

None is Martha, none Mary save they themselves. None is fated by temperament or disposition, locked into an individualistic cell. None is in competition. The Cross and Resurrection have altered that. Each stands before the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit, and each serves and listens, knowing that both actions are the one. Martha would have served him but he came to serve and given his life a ransom for many. 'Ransom for many' was the true service, not a humanly oriented help of another. When we looked compassionately to the needy, the distracted, and the anxious we do them no service with the palliative of social care. They need the glory of God to enter and renew them in the image in which they were made. Mary was no less needy than Martha, but she seemed to know her need and the death of Christ which would fulfil it and take her onwards. Martha came to peace through the glory, not through admonition, psychological correction, or any such thing.

Now we may enjoy and use our 'particularity', our 'differentiation' the identity He has given us, knowing it will grow up into the fullness of the image of His Son.