

Better or best?

Beyond the binaries in Luke

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 July 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 6C

Colossians 1: 15-28; Luke 10: 38-42

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>. The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

This is a well-known but in some ways seriously annoying story, and I blame Luke – to say nothing of centuries of largely male, monastic interpretation - which can basically be summarised as ‘Hurrah Mary’ and ‘Boo Martha’. Or more aggressively as ‘stop complaining and pray harder’! Anyone out there feel like they’d like to muster at least a small cheer for Martha? Hurrah!

This is a story that has been used as a means of social control in church and state, and a means of silencing the voices of women. For the very way this story is constructed, tends to make us choose sides. So, whether we are sympathising with Martha and feeling she’s a bit hard done by, or cheering Mary for breaking the gender stereotype, it is hard to remain neutral. The story itself sets up the two supposed sisters in opposition to one another...

This story, like the story of the Samaritan that we heard last week, with which it is often paired in a kind of action versus contemplation duality, has been causing bother for centuries. Both stories belong to material found nowhere else in the Synoptic gospels, leading many commentators to believe that they were never part of Jesus’s story, but rather part of Luke’s own imaginative purpose and teaching as they reflected on the life of the early Jesus movement.

This may help a little, as having the rebuke to Martha apparently come from Jesus himself, adds to its power – as no doubt Luke intended. If in fact the scenario is entirely the invention of Luke, we can relax a little and free ourselves to ask some ‘what if’ questions about what is actually going on in this story, and what liberative strands can be found.

Feminist scholars have played with this story and arrived at two readings that empower the two women. Unfortunately, they are readings that are hard to hold together – but ‘what if’ we try?

Let’s first of all place ourselves in the context of the day and the mores of first century Judaism. As the scholar Carol Norén points out (in *Who Dares to Be Free* 21/7/19 ministrymatters.com), in that context, the episode was shocking, not for reproving Martha but for praising Mary. As far as that shame culture was concerned, Martha was in the right.

She knew how to serve itinerant preachers, how to offer hospitality. And if the hospitality was not up to scratch, she and her whole household would be shamed. So ordering Mary back to the kitchen was entirely reasonable.

"It was the custom for a Jewish man to pray every morning, thanking God he was not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman. A common saying of the time was that it was better for the Torah to be burned than put into the hands of a woman. Now, as Jewish scholars have pointed out, we also have to balance this with the active ministries of many Judaeen women at that time. However the wider Gentile Graeco-Roman world to which Luke was writing was itself quite negative towards women's participation in public life. So, for Mary to sit at Jesus' feet, just as any student of a great rabbi would, was scandalous. For Jesus to commend her was incredible."

So that's one reinterpretation, that casts Mary in the role of scholar and rabbinical student, and there is a truly liberating invitation in that which we might want to hold on to. However, we have somehow to get past the very real rebuke to Martha. Commentators try to soften the blow – Jesus is not angry with Martha they say, just sad that she's not taking the chance to - mmm, sit still, be quiet and listen?!

Oh dear, it's not quite as simple as a commendation of the life of prayer over that of action, is it? It makes Jesus sound not 'affectionate', but patronising. Doesn't it sound horribly like the plenary council of the Catholic Church last week, which initially failed to ensure that *'the experiences and perspectives of women are heard, considered and valued'* and rejecting the idea of female deacons?

'What if,' for all the praise often given to the writer of Luke's gospel as an advocate for women, they are just as patriarchal as any other New Testament or early church writer?

An important twentieth century interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha originates with the great New Testament scholar and theologian Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza. She contends that indeed this story is *'generated by and addressed to a situation in the life of the early church'*. (Fiorenza *But She Said* p62). Schussler-Fiorenza is quick to point out that the narrative nowhere actually says that Martha is busy in the kitchen preparing the meal. Rather she points up the use of the word 'diakonian' meaning 'serving' or ministering', which Luke uses in the Acts of the Apostles to refer to ecclesial leadership and specifically to serving the Eucharistic meal.

Martha, in this translation, is *'preoccupied with the tasks of ministry'*. A distinction is then being drawn in the text between the tasks of ministry, already open to women in the early church, and the listening to – but not the preaching of – the word of God.

This story could then be seen as being used by Luke to pit the apostolic women of the Jesus movement against each other, appealing to a supposedly revelatory word of the resurrected Jesus to restrict women's ministry and silence female leaders of house churches like Martha, while at the same time extolling the silent and subordinate role of Mary.

So, when we look again at this story, who do we see? Do we see in Martha a harassed housewife, striving to fulfil the duties demanded by Jewish hospitality, and admonishing another woman for choosing a different path?

Or do we see a considerable church leader, whose autonomy and self-determination is being challenged by the male headship of the early church?

Do we see in Mary a woman defying the expectations of her day and asserting her right to equal discipleship with male students?

Or do we see a woman being put back in the place of silence and submission to male authority – allowed to listen but not to challenge or speak?

And either way, do we want to accept the neat categorisation, the binary opposites that Luke has set up for us – action against contemplation, the domestic sphere versus the realm of intellect and prayer, distraction versus singleness of purpose, flesh versus spirit?

Are we convinced by this injunction to choose *'the better part'*? Or can we move beyond better, to something else, maybe even to best?

Let's just shake this story up a bit and see what else might flow from it. Let's first of all consider this household, where Jesus is apparently offered hospitality – but that in itself asks a question: *'who is the host?'*

John's gospel describes Martha as the head of this household. This in itself is very odd, because in Jewish households of the time the man would have been seen as head of the household, so what is going on with Lazarus? Disability scholars have wanted to claim Lazarus as perhaps a member of their community, providing an explanation for why Martha is so described.

Others suggest that this rather curious *menage à trois* is not what it first seems – that perhaps indeed these three people are not blood relatives at all, but people who have chosen to live together for reasons of convenience, and indeed form something of a model of early house churches, whose members refer to each other as brother and sister. It represents a 'family of choice'.

Some go so far as to suggest a lesbian relationship between Mary and Martha, and that Lazarus could be identified in a homo-erotic way as 'the beloved disciple'.

We will certainly never know, but just the suggestion opens up another window into this text, helping move it on from something of a 'good housekeeping' guide, into a celebration of other possible ways of being and living. It invites us into a more embodied and less spiritualised reading.

Mary 'has chosen' – and choice is important here – to sit at the feet of Jesus. Now feet feature in the gospels don't they? There's the woman who bathes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair – perhaps giving Jesus the idea for his own ritual of foot washing. The washing of feet, the being with feet as an act of hospitality is part of 'walking the way' of Jesus.

Indeed, it is interesting to reflect on why the church took up the command to share bread and wine with such enthusiasm, and so many pedantic details of how that was to be done, yet very rarely washed feet.

That in itself says something about the gap between the fleshly, dirty, no doubt bruised and sore feet of the Christ incarnate in Jesus and the anodyne and increasingly disembodied practices of the Church – a Church as the centuries passed less and less engaged with the dirt, and the earth.

Does Luke's Mary, here portrayed sitting passively at the feet of Jesus, not touching, not sensuously engaging in the actions of washing, give us insight into why we have failed as Church to respond so the cries of the planet?

How then might we now choose to sit at Jesus's feet in the actions we take to redress the damage done? What are we doing to overcome this Lukan rejection of flesh in favour of spirit?

And in restoring the fleshliness, the humanity of the characters in this story, can we find a place for ourselves? For surely it is the case that we are all Mary, and we are all Martha.

Indeed, it can hardly be accidental that the two women actually have the same stem to their names – the Hebrew 'mar' meaning master or Lord – such that in this story there are three characters Jesus, referred to as 'Lord' and these 'sisters' whose names imply they are 'mistress' of the household.

Mary of course is strongly identified in early iconography with the Church, and so this can be read as a story about the Church, and its earliest internal debates. It is almost a thesaurus for the word 'distracted' – used four times in different ways for Martha, who is described as 'pulled around', 'worried', 'anxious' and 'distracted'. Behind her anxiety, perhaps we can read the all too human anxiety of Luke and Luke's church.

Listening to the earthly Jesus was one thing. Running this increasingly unwieldy institution with its rivalries and disagreements quite another.

Perhaps the gospel writer was simply longing for a little peace and quiet, and certainly a return to some established social mores more congenial to the Graeco-Roman world than the radical hospitality proposed by Jesus.

Again, we shall never know. But what we can take from this story is that the early Jesus movement clearly invited women to some different roles that are visible even in their rejection.

We can see too that the early Jesus movement was an embodied movement that was not easily pinned down to one place or set of conventional relationships, and so we should view with suspicion attempts to use its teaching for that purpose.

And we can see that when a story annoys us and gets under our skin, it is probably inviting us to ask deeper questions and find ways of living beyond simple binaries.

In the name of Christ, the binary breaker.

Amen