

Faith in Word and Deed: Martha & Mary in Gospel Context  
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## Introduction

Martha and Mary are two minor but important characters in the Gospels of Luke and John. In very different stories, the two women play parallel roles that have something to say about both discipleship and ministry. Whatever insights that we can draw from them, however, are grounded in their characterisation in the Gospels: the way in which they are depicted by the Lukan and Johannine evangelists. In other words, what Mary and Martha communicate about being disciples of Jesus, and participating in his mission, arises from the characterisation they possess in the Gospel stories.

Strange as it may seem, Gospel characters take their place in four worlds at the same time; each of these we will explore briefly this evening. Characters belong, first of all, in the narrative world of the text, they belong *within* the text—in its story line or plot. In this context, they can be depicted as flat characters or round; as static or dynamic. Secondly, characters may also belong in the *symbolic world* of the text, as representative figures *within* the text: those who represent specific qualities or virtues. Here their depiction is determined by the theological outlook of the Gospel-writer. Thirdly, characters generally belong in the *historical world* which lies *behind* the text, the world of Jesus' own ministry. And, lastly, in an extended sense, Gospel characters can be said to belong also in the world *in front of* the text—that is, to us as contemporary readers. This evening we examine the ways in which Martha and Mary, as Gospel characters, belong in these four worlds: the narrative, the symbolic, the historical, and the contemporary.

## 1. The Narrative World

Luke's narrative is easily the best known of the two stories: Jesus comes to visit Martha and Mary, and is welcomed into their home; there is complaint by one of the sisters against the other, and Jesus resolves it in favour of the other:

<i>Part 1. Martha welcomes Jesus &amp; Mary sits at his feet (vv. 38-39)</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>Part 2. Martha complains to Jesus against Mary (v. 40)</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>Part 3. Jesus rebukes Martha &amp; defends Mary (vv. 41-42)</i>	<i>B'</i>

The story is very short. It is set between the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and Jesus' teaching on prayer (Lk 11:1-13): between incidents about love of neighbour, on the one hand, and spirituality, on the other. The action takes place on Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem in Luke, somewhere near its beginning, in an unnamed village presumably in Galilee (cf Lk 10:13-16). The conflict arises from the role each sister has chosen in which Jesus, appealed to as an adjudicator, supports Mary over Martha. There is no mention of a brother, Lazarus, nor is the story related to Jesus' death.

In John's Gospel, by contrast, the sisters are part of a long narrative in seven scenes (Jn 11:1-12:11). It has the threat to Lazarus' life as the narrative frame (Scenes 1 & 7), the raising of Lazarus at its centre (Scene 4), and the sisters' very different responses on either side (Scenes 2 & 6):

<i>Scene 1. Threat to Lazarus 11:1-16</i>	<i>Scene 7. Threat to Lazarus 12:9-11</i>
<i>Scene 2. Martha &amp; Jesus 11:17-27</i>	<i>Scene 6. Mary &amp; Jesus 12:1-8</i>
<i>Scene 3. Belief &amp; unbelief of 'Jews' 11:28-37</i>	<i>Scene 5. Belief &amp; unbelief of 'Jews' 11:45-52</i>
<i>Scene 4. The raising of Lazarus 11:38-44</i>	

The story take place in Bethany, a village just outside Jerusalem (Jn 11:1). It acts as a bridge between Jesus' ministry and his passion and death, bringing the first half of the Gospel to its climax and setting the second in motion. The sisters play vitally important roles in relation to faith and discipleship,

which is the core of John's narrative. They are among Jesus' friends and disciples, who throughout the illness and death of their brother, come to reveal Jesus' identity and the true significance of his mission.

We begin with the character of Martha. If we look at Luke and John, side-by-side, we see that the basic characterisation of Martha is coherent across the two Gospels. The Johannine Martha is a dynamic character, not flat or static. She begins with an initial scepticism (scene 2, 11:21), which changes to a ringing affirmation of Jesus as 'the resurrection and the life' by the end of the scene (11:25-27). Later still, we find her serving Jesus at table after the raising of Lazarus (scene 6, 12:2). The Lukan Martha is likewise a rounded character. She has a close relationship with Jesus to whom, at first, she extends unqualified hospitality (Lk 10:38b). Believing and hospitality, then, are the two main traits of Martha's character in Luke and John. In both, she is outspoken and confident, blunt in her opinions and articulate in their expression. In both, she has the boldness to reproach Jesus. No question of shame prevents her. She is a force to be reckoned with in both Gospels.

As a character, Martha is also portrayed in John as limited or wavering in faith. The level of her faith is confusing in her opening words to Jesus (scene 2, 11:21-22): 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask, God will give you.' Martha believes in the resurrection of the dead (11:24), but lacks a Johannine perspective. As the scene develops (11:17-27), her faith leaps forward. Her emphatic *nai*, *Kyrie*, 'yes, Lord,' her confident *egō pepisteuka*, 'I have come to believe', and the titles she confers on Jesus ('Christ, Son of God, the one coming into the world'; cf 1:9, 14, 18, 34; 20:31), all these indicate considerable advance in faith. Martha's Christology is insightful: she has grasped something of who Jesus is. What remains incomplete is her eschatology, as her exclamation at the tomb suggests (scene 4, 11:39). There her faith wavers, and she resists the opening of the tomb, not realising what Jesus is about to do. Nonetheless, her basic confession of faith still stands, even if she does not yet grasp its implications.

The Lukan Martha is depicted as a woman of even more limited faith. Despite the warmth of her initial welcome, the complaint against her sister shows her limitations. Luke leaves no room for any character development—Jesus' rebuke of Martha and his defense of Mary concludes the Lukan story. We are left with the portrait of a commendable yet flawed woman, who is anxious to befriend Jesus but confuses the priorities of discipleship. Herein lies the difference between Luke and John. In both, Martha is a woman of faith, a disciple of Jesus, who welcomes his presence and acknowledges his identity. In both, she 'serves' Jesus, engaging in *diakonia*. But, whereas in Luke her faith is defective, in John she reaches a deeper level of understanding.

We turn now to the figure of Mary. The Johannine Mary is presented as a rounded, rather than flat character. Although her development is not as striking as Martha's, it is apparent on the two occasions we meet her in John's story. Initially Mary falls at Jesus' feet in grief, uttering the same reproach with which Martha first greets him (scene 3, 11:32). This scene depicts a kind of paroxysm of grief: Mary's grief, the mourners', and Jesus' own complex emotions. In Mary's second meeting with Jesus she again falls at his feet but this time in gratitude and love, where she anoints his feet (12:3). Mary has complexity as a character in John. She grows in faith in the narrative, between her first and second falling at Jesus' feet: the first expressing dismay and disappointment; the second articulating love and faith.

In Luke's depiction, nothing is said of any faith development on the part of Mary; she is a more static figure. She may not seem to defend herself against the complaints and demands of her sister, but her silence indicates a determination not to yield. Mary's role might appear, to us, a passive one, but it is more accurate to describe it as receptive. She is open and trusting, on the one hand, and at the same time, determined and unconventional: choosing an unusual role in a culture where hospitality was a sacred duty, especially for women, and remaining resolute in holding onto it. In this choice, and this resolution, Mary expresses her faith. Despite the flatness of her character in Luke, her basic characteristics are thus the same in both Gospels: her place at Jesus' feet in both signifies a strong and singular faith.

## 2. The Symbolic World

If figures such as Martha and Mary have their own characterisation, they also play a symbolic role within the world of the text. This feature is most apparent in the Fourth Gospel, but it is also found in Luke. Behind all the symbols of John's Gospel stands the Johannine Jesus, who symbolises God *par*

*excellence*: whose face he makes visible, whose voice audible, whose glory tangible. Although the Gospel of Luke does not have the same symbolic force, there is likewise the presence of core imagery which conveys something of Luke's Christology. In this sense, the symbolic role of characters relates primarily to Jesus. The Johannine Martha and Mary, in different ways, point to Jesus as the resurrection and the life, the one who possesses divine authority over life and death, including his own. In Luke's Gospel, the sisters also point to Jesus' identity. His visit to their home is one scene in the great drama of divine hospitality around which the plot of the Gospel turns. The hospitality of Martha and devotion of Mary attest to Jesus, each sister, in her own way, acknowledging his identity.

At the same time, Martha and Mary, through their characterisation, play a symbolic function in their own right. A symbol is not simply a signpost which points elsewhere and has no intrinsic value. The two women certainly do serve symbolically to point to Jesus in his unique identity. As symbols, however, the sisters do more: they embody in themselves the message of the good news, according to Luke and according to John.

In this sense, the Johannine Martha represents the believer, the friend of Jesus, who struggles with the tragic reality of death in the light of faith. The symbolic function of the Lukan Martha is more complex. She is a woman of faith, but more fallible and misguided in her response to Jesus, despite her good intentions. Debate over the symbolic function of Luke's Martha is no new thing. In older versions, Martha is seen to represent the active, as against the contemplative, life; in newer models, she signifies active Christian ministry, the diaconal vocation of the seven in Acts 6. In some feminist circles, she stands for the feisty, outspoken woman who, daring to raise her voice, is put back in her place.

Martha's Lukan significance, however, has to be seen within the Gospel as a whole. At the beginning of the story, it is plain that Martha, although not a literal follower of Jesus, nonetheless belongs in the company of the Galilean women who minister to Jesus, supporting him with their generosity and wealth (Lk 4:39; 8:1-3; 23:55-24:10). Her service, however defective in one sense, reflects true Christian ministry and hospitality, in another sense. Martha's initial welcome of Jesus is the appropriate response of a disciple. She ministers to Jesus, mirroring the servant life and death of Jesus himself in this Gospel (Lk 22:27). Yet her service is in some way distorted—largely because it leads her to disdain Mary's choice. Martha symbolises the flawed disciple, who plays her part while resenting that of another. Luke articulates a gradation of responses to Jesus, with Martha representing the lower type, while Mary represents the higher.

Mary's symbolic role in both Gospels is that of unqualified faith and love. In the Johannine account of the banquet (scene 6), her place at Jesus' feet and her anointing both have symbolic value. Her posture now signifies faith and devotion, in contrast to the grief and despair which it first denoted (scene 3, 11:32). Mary replaces the odour of death at the tomb with the fragrance of life: the smell of decay exchanged for the aroma of love. With the costly outpouring of the myrrh, Mary mirrors the costliness of what Jesus has done in pouring out his life for her brother. She stands for the true disciple, in contrast to Judas Iscariot, the false disciple. But the anointing turns out to be also prophetic, pointing to the death of Jesus and the anointing of his body in burial (cf 19:38-42). Mary's symbolic act intimates that the raising of Lazarus has, at its centre, the cross.

A similar pattern is present in Luke's narrative, though without connection to the passion. Here, too, Mary sits at Jesus' feet, a place of honour and insight in this Gospel (Lk 5:8; 7:38; 8:35; 8:41; 17:16); here too she is silent and makes no effort to defend herself; here too she is supported by Jesus against accusation. These parallels suggest a similarity of symbolic function. In both Gospels, Mary is quiet, intense, devout, a woman of few words, sensitive to the symbolic gesture, the representative pose; a dedicated disciple, with a deep level of awareness. She symbolises what it means to be an authentic disciple and friend of Jesus, responding to him with costly love. Her place at Jesus' feet, whether listening or anointing, represents the open-hearted, self-giving love of the true disciple.

Especially in John's Gospel, Martha and Mary represent, not simply individual believers, but also the apostolic community, the church. Martha's confident words in confessing her faith indicate the Christian leader, who makes the core confession of faith on behalf of the believing community. Her display of faith plays a similar function to Peter in the Synoptic Gospel, who also declares, 'You are the Christ'. Mary's faith, by contrast, is expressed in symbolic action, as we have seen: her stance at the feet of Jesus and her anointing acknowledge, by implication, his identity and his saving death.

The Johannine Martha and Mary act in counterpart in confessing the faith of the church. Martha's confession is in *word*, in the 'I believe' of her response to Jesus' self-disclosure (11:27), while Mary's is in *deed*, in the anointing of his feet, with all its implications of dedication and love. Together the two women disclose the church's belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

### 3. The World Behind the Text

Martha and Mary also belong in the world behind the text, the historical world. The fact that we find them in two different Gospel traditions—the Synoptic and the Johannine—confirms that they belong within the ministry of Jesus. Not all Jesus' disciples literally followed him, particularly on his last journey to Jerusalem, and the Gospels speak of a number of people, named and unnamed, who counted themselves among his supporters. This group included a number of women. While some of these women followed Jesus to Jerusalem—itself a counter-cultural act—other people, both women and men, expressed their discipleship through more general friendship and hospitality. Martha and Mary clearly belonged among this latter group.

The historical reality is complicated, however, by two factors. In the first place, Lazarus is not mentioned in Luke's account; the implication is that Martha is the head of her household. Some suggest either that Luke does not know of his existence, or that John has added him to his own story. A more likely scenario is that Lazarus had his own home, apart from his sisters, and that his presence is irrelevant to the Lukan tale. The second historical difficulty is the question of geographical location: Luke suggests a village in Galilee, whereas John is clear that it is located in Judaea. Yet, the Gospel accounts are not strictly chronological. Given that Luke is vague on the geography, it may be that John is more accurate in setting the location in Bethany outside Jerusalem.

The coherent characterisation of the two women across the two Gospels reinforces the historical point. While their strength of faith is not identical, particularly in the case of Martha, the characteristics of the two women are consistent. Martha, as we have seen, is frank, assertive, and responsible in both accounts—outward focussed rather than inward, with a tendency to speak her mind, even when her speech is embarrassing or inconvenient. Her sister, Mary, on the other hand, is by contrast quiet and introverted in both Gospels, more likely to express herself in symbolic action rather than speech. This characterisation is most likely grounded in history rather than a literary fabrication of the evangelists.

A further factor reinforcing the historical underpinnings stories is that of birth order. In birth order theory, Martha betrays the characteristics of an oldest child. She is assertive, and takes responsibility ('she welcomed him', Lk 10:38; 'she served', Jn 12:2), showing a strong sense of duty and respect for authority. She has a conservative attitude in values, both social and theological. In her outspoken criticisms, and her sense of what is right and proper, Martha acts as the eldest sibling. It is more difficult to describe the other two in relation to birth order. However, while there are few personal characteristics attributed to Lazarus, Mary betrays the qualities of a youngest born. She is intense, focussed, capable of intimacy and acting in unconventional ways. The 'rebel' streak is apparent in her choosing 'the better part' in Luke and in the unbinding of her hair in John. Mary has the appearance of a youngest child, in her warmth, intensity, and unconventionality. In this respect birth order theory substantiates the striking similarities of characterisation between both women in the Gospels of Luke and John, a characterisation grounded in historical reality and in the ministry of the historical Jesus.

### 4. The World in Front of the Text

The fourth world, the world in front of the text, is a place that exegetes, for the most part, do not enter. This is the world we enter whenever we read and seek to interpret the text, whenever we stand in the space opened up by the text. In this liminal space, Mary and Martha belong also to us, as contemporary readers, and as those who have inherited and pass on the apostolic tradition. In this realm, there are distinct implications Martha and Mary have for discipleship and ministry today. For a start, it is important to see female characters in the Gospels as having a representative role, not just for women, but for all readers of the Gospel. In the last couple of decades, female characters in the Gospels have been seen as representing women, because of the way women have been marginalised. However, while not ignoring this aspect, we need also to take the next step. Female characters in the Gospels are not just there for women readers, any more than male characters are present only for a

male readership. Women characters need also to be read representatively. This means that the message which Martha and Mary bring to us today is not just for women, but for all readers.

With this point in mind, we can recognise how these two stories reveal the nature of discipleship. They show that what lies at the centre of our life as disciples is communion with Christ. The image of Mary's devotion in both Gospels, sitting at the feet of Jesus, in a pose of receptivity and rest makes this point vividly. Perhaps there is not enough of this 'sitting at the feet' in the church. We're sometimes more comfortable doing things; perhaps that's why the Lukan Martha finds so much sympathy by readers, right across the board. And yet, if it comes to a competition—which, of course, rightly speaking, it is not—then Mary's choice will receive priority every time. Listening to Jesus, being at home with him, finding true rest in him: Luke and John agree that this lies at the core of who we are as disciples, as church. Elsewhere, John's Gospel speaks of it as 'abiding'. Here is the vocation to which we are all called, clergy and laity alike. We are called to abide in Christ, to make our home in him, to find in him that centre around which all else turns.

The reason for this priority is not just about spirituality—though it is in part. It's also about the centrality of worship. This is where Mary is important for us. Her stance in both Gospels is, ultimately, an act of worship. To use language that Luke's Jesus uses elsewhere, it's about obeying the first commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Spirituality in the end is not about us—though it's where our well-being lies; it's about *God*, and about glorifying *God*, and about loving God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. That is the primary 'task' of the church, and that's the primary vocation each one of us is given: to be like Mary, to find our true rest, our centre, in God, the God revealed in Christ—even in the midst of struggle, suffering, and grief.

Our two stories remind us, moreover, that this resting-place is dependent on who Jesus is. His identity is determinative of ours, not the other way round. And that's where confession of faith comes in. As Christians, we don't have a notion of a vague, amorphous Being or Force out there, which we hope is for our good. Our confidence lies in the mystery and revelation of the triune God, a God whose goodness and mercy we can trust, whose will is to give life, in and beyond death, life in abundance. The church professes such a faith, and confesses it in worship and, ultimately, in every aspect of its life. Martha's profession and confession of faith—even if she doesn't grasp its full meaning—represents the church's faith: the content and shape of that faith, its form and substance. This is the faith in which we find solace.

In this horizon, our ministry makes sense, finds its place: our hospitality, our mission, our evangelism, our work for justice and reconciliation, our concern for the environment. All of this is encompassed by the notion of 'loving our neighbours as ourselves'. It is part of our vocation as disciples, as church. But it is not self-sufficient or independent; it flows from a prior love that motivates, enables, strengthens us to love the other as ourselves. We have to get things in the right order, otherwise we become disoriented, anxious, off-centre, just like the Lukan Martha.

At the same time, Martha and Mary indicate something of the diversity of faith and spirituality. We don't all have the same level or depth of faith, which is one reason we need one another, both to give and to receive; we need the church catholic to believe for us when we waiver. But neither do we all express faith in the same way. The two sisters represent different responses to Jesus—not perfect responses, certainly, but not wrong for being different. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the church still hasn't grasped that kind of diversity within orthodox faith. To quote St Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians 12: 'Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?' The answer, of course, for Paul, is an emphatic no. We are all different, and we express our vocation as disciples and ministers of the gospel in different ways.

This point implies that the gospel calls us to be ourselves, our true selves, and to bring our gifts to God, as we do in the eucharist. 'The glory of God,' famously said Irenaeus, 'is humanity fully alive'. We're not called to put on pious masks, to pretend to religious feelings we don't have, or to perform religious rituals we don't believe. We're called to become who we are in Christ—and that means, becoming more fully human not less so. If we need a reminder of that, we have only to re-read the stories of Martha and Mary: characters who are themselves, with all their limitations, yet who are able to grow in faith, in ways that are uniquely their own.

## Conclusion

As characters, Martha and Mary belong in four worlds: narrative, symbolic, historical, and contemporary. They possess similar characterisations in Luke and John, for all the differences between them. Martha is the more dominant, conservative, and bluntly-spoken sister, with a strong sense of responsibility. Mary is the more figurative in her responses, the more intense and unconventional. Both women have symbolic significance: each, in her own way, represents discipleship and ministry in all its ambiguity and magnitude. In this sense, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, Martha and Mary also belong in our world, in that fourth domain, as they step out of the pages of the text and come to meet us. In these two stories in Luke and John, and through the characterisation of the two women, we are given a glimpse of what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to centre our lives on him and to serve others. Mary and Martha, with all their limitations, are models for us of what it means to be the church. We conclude with the words of the Orthodox troparion (hymn) for the feast of Martha and Mary:

You fervently believed in Christ  
and his marvellous acts,  
O Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus.  
You were adorned with radiant virtues  
and were found worthy  
to be numbeed with the saints.  
Together with holy Lazarus, pray for us.

