Luke 10.38-42
Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary

Context

Luke’s Gospel is arranged in eight sections, which cover 24 chapters. Here we are right in the middle. We have heard of Jesus’ birth, childhood and the beginning of his ministry. He has finished his work in Galilee and is on his way to Jerusalem to the temple and the final chapter of his life. As he travels he is teaching (the passage directly before is the Good Samaritan). He stops at the home of Martha, Lazarus and Mary, which is traditionally in Bethany, near Jerusalem.

Content

The passage can be divided up as follows:

- vv 38 Establishing the social context
- vv 39-40 Description of the incident: Martha’s challenge
- vv 41-42 Resolution: Jesus’ response and teaching

Verse 38
Martha is the head of the household – she welcomes Jesus into ‘her home’. For this reason it is normally assumed that she was older than Lazarus and Mary. She is the patron – prosperous, independent and able to host a traveller. The term ‘welcomed’ is a technical one relating to hospitality and connects us back to the Good Samaritan, who showed good hospitality on the road to one who fell among bandits. Martha too, is ready to show hospitality, but this story is a comment on what kind of hospitality Jesus wants to receive.

Verses 39-40
These two verses compare and contrast the activities of the two sisters. Mary is sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening. Martha is very busy serving and becomes resentful. She tries to engage the support of Jesus to force her sister to help her. Several things can help us interpret what is going on and why Jesus responds as he does.

1) Mary’s behavior is unexpected for a woman. Houses in the 1stC were divided into separate spheres: public and private and usually the women did not spend time sitting in the public room with the men listening to their discussions; they were in the private sphere involved in domestic matters. Mary, instead, is ‘sitting at the feet’ of a Rabbi – a technical term which indicates discipleship. (So Paul ‘sat at the feet’ of Gamaliel).
2) Martha’s behavior is one of service, usually lauded in Luke’s Gospel, but look at her attitude. Her service is rooted in anxiety: ‘but Martha was distracted…’. Perhaps, as well as feeling that Mary is not helping, she is also uncomfortable about the fact that Mary is sitting in a traditionally ‘male’ space, adopting behavior associated with a male disciple. She tries to enlist the support of Jesus. Surely he also will feel that Mary should be out the back helping, as women normally do? Verses 41-42

Jesus’ response is very definite. He chastises Martha and supports Mary. He sees into the heart of Martha and perhaps identifies her mixed motives. She is not just worried about getting the supper on the table but ‘worried and distracted by many things’. Though she calls him ‘Lord’ she wants Jesus to support her plans, rather than learning about his. Conversely, though Martha is concerned with many things, Mary is only concerned with one: listening to Jesus. She provides a different type of hospitality to the Lord – not based in anxious activity, but grounded in the absolute attention of the good disciple. This will not be taken from her, even though it does not fit with the social expectations of the day. This is the kind of hospitality Jesus wants. Jesus does not insist that the tradition of a woman’s place being merely to serve in the domestic sphere must be upheld.

**Two sisters: Two spiritualities?**

This passage has often been used to contrast different types of spirituality and, in some cases to establish the priority of a contemplative life against an active, service based one. Understanding the key theme of hospitality and the social context of the position of women in the first century helps us to see that this is an incorrect interpretation. Jesus wants us to attend to his word first, then we can also welcome and serve others.

**What now for Martha?**

This is not the last we hear about Mary and Martha in the Gospels. A very important passage to understand their characters appears in the later Gospel of John when their brother Lazarus dies. (11.17-44). Look at their behaviour in this passage. Has Martha moved on in her discipleship?

**Some questions for us**

Martha is overwhelmed by the demands of domestic responsibility – to walk away from this was unthinkable to her. This is the housewives equivalent of Jesus’ words to the rich young man “Go, sell all you have, and then come and follow me” (Mk 10.17-22). What are the non-negotiable obligations in your life, the responsibilities which you couldn’t consider leaving?

Who do you most identify with: Martha or Mary, and why?

Imagine you were in Martha and Mary’s house that night. There were guests to feed but also the opportunity to hear Jesus’ teaching. What would you do? How would you go about ensuring you heard what Jesus had to say but also sorting out the supper.

Do you ever feel that practical responsibilities get in the way of deepening your spiritual life? What could you do about this?