

Homily for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 Year C

Now most of us, when we hear the story of Martha and Mary, have a mental picture of a doe-eyed Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, wrapt in attention, whilst He is expanding some teaching to her.

Martha is busy and distracted with some domestic chores and we, especially women, are riled, at Jesus' perhaps insensitive remark that Mary has chosen the better option.

The great St Teresa of Avila, mystic, and great spiritual teacher on prayer, remarked practically, that "if Martha had imitated Mary, Christ would have had to go without His dinner!"

So what is the Lord saying to us? Why was Mary's attitude to be praised?

Let's look at the whole story again from a different slant.

Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus were great friends of Jesus. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to face His Passion and death on the Cross. The human side of Him must have filled Him with fear and terror at the pain and suffering ahead. He needed to sit down and talk, to share His burden with someone who was willing to listen, someone with great empathy, somebody, perhaps, who could hold His hand, and with a few well-chosen words, encourage Him to face the terrible task ahead.

Mary instinctively fulfilled that role. She understood the needs of Jesus in that moment and gave Him her undivided attention.

Maybe she said nothing, but just listened. Time spent in the Lord's company was more important than fussing to make Him more comfortable. Jesus proposes Mary as a role model to us for perhaps two distinct reasons.

Firstly, how vital it is to just make ourselves available to others and sometimes just listen. Our silence and concern can often help another person to unburden themselves. They need to speak and to put those problems and fears into words, and at the end of it, apart from the sheer relief of letting it all out, they often come up with the answer themselves.

The art of attentive listening is a powerful pastoral tool. Openness and receptivity to others deepens our relationships to them.

Secondly, the gospel teaches us how important it is for our own personal spiritual well-being to take time to sit quietly in the presence of the Lord and be guided by Him. We rush about so much and yet the important things can get forgotten and remain undone.

We need to discover how important it is, not just to do things in the presence of the Lord, but sometimes, just in silence, be in the presence of the Lord.

Our approach is often based upon what we can do for others, how we can smother them in kindness, when all they are really looking for is our company.

And the two meet, because time spent visiting a lonely old person in their home, can also be time spent in the company of the Lord. For what we do for others we also do for Christ who is present in them.

Martha was busy and distracted, providing for what she thought Jesus wanted, Mary instinctively gave Him what she knew He needed. A big difference.