



## **Images**

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

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If you lived in Jesus' times you would be accustomed to seeing the emperor's image, pretending to be divine, on the Roman coins. To Jews and Gentiles alike the message that Christ Jesus is the "image" (in Greek, icon) of God is politically and spiritually revolutionary. There is a subversive, even treasonous element in this text, as Christ is declared what only the emperor was supposed to be. People found professing that Jesus, and not the emperor, was God were accused of sedition by the Roman authority and nailed to a cross. And Christians professing that Jesus was Lord, a title reserved for God, were accused of blasphemy by the Jews and kicked out of the synagogue.

But the early Christians were clear about it. If you want to see God look no further than Jesus. If you want to know what God is like look at Jesus, the God who took on human flesh and the human who assumed divinity. If you want to know God's plan for creation, again, refer to the Christ, the origin and the destiny of the universe.

Perhaps, reading Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase of the original message of the letter to the Colossians might aid us in our grasping of the meaning:

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.<sup>1</sup>

This is high poetry depicting what words have difficulty expressing. We can spend a lifetime taking it in and letting it transform our inner selves. That's the scope of meditation and contemplation: to sit at the feet of the living Word and let it transform us. And what is required is not that we wrap our mind around the mystery. We just have to let the mystery hold us and wow us.

A bit like today's gospel story, the one we all know well about Martha and Mary hosting Jesus and his friends. How much have we used the story to judge and condemn ourselves and others? Whom do we root for? Whom do we identify with?

Is the story a case of misplaced priorities? Does it talk about social expectations?

First of all, Martha's reception of our Lord Jesus into her house is the expression and result of her faith in him. Martha believed in Jesus. She not only opened the doors of her home to him, but the doors of her heart as well. And as he did with Martha, our Lord calls at the hearts of the men

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<sup>1</sup> The Message, Colossians 1:15-18

and women in every age, asking to be allowed in. The Eternal Word of the Father made Man comes out to meet us, his brothers and sisters, looking for a welcome. On our part, all we have to do is to receive him by faith. Faith means opening our doors to Christ, welcoming him into our home, sharing our table with him; it means letting him into the most intimate part of our soul.

Martha's attitude shows that our response to God should not just be a matter of the intellect or emotions but must also be expressed in deeds. Once someone has accepted the God who reveals himself, faith affects every aspect of their being and actions. That is why deeds done with love are also necessary for salvation.<sup>2</sup>

But...did she overdo it? Jesus does rebuke her in this story. Why? Yogi Berra jokingly expresses what I think Jesus wanted to say, "Make a game plan and stick to it. Unless it's not working."

It is often thought that Martha does not stop doing her tasks simply because she has misplaced priorities. We easily assume, after a quick reading of today's gospel, that Jesus is favoring a devotional life over a busy life and that the dedication to the *teaching* of Jesus is superior to the work involved in practical *service*. If that were the case, I could easily imagine the inner fight of a Christian wanting to dedicate more time to prayer and meditation only to find oneself restless and uncomfortable at sitting for just a few minutes in silent prayer. Can I get a witness?

We all admit that prayer, silence, and contemplation are important but when given the opportunity we don't know what to do with ourselves. Is it, perhaps, a matter of gaining a few spiritual skills or strengthening our spiritual muscles? At the end of the sermon, we will do just that, spend a few moments in silent prayer aided by Taizé meditation music. The purpose of repeating a musical verse is to enter into a deeper relaxed place where it's easier to perceive the presence of the Spirit. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pop65vCB6Oo>)

Jesus does not rebuke Martha for being too harsh with her sister or for doing too much. She simply has "too much to do." Task oriented? Yes. Even so, leaving the things that "must be done" in favor of the interior life is a challenge of Christian spirituality. There is always something that "must be done," but the "must" is often a matter of perspective; what do we say must be done?

In the Christian life, the things that must be done are simple: "Love the Lord your God with all you're your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) As St. Teresa of Avila wrote: "Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone is sufficient."

Perhaps, what Jesus wants to highlight is the importance of *focus* as we do the many things that must be done.

What we have in today's gospel is not sibling's rivalry; it isn't one sister jealous of the other. It isn't either each sister showing off whatever image she wants to portray: the multi-tasking busy-bee or the saintly goody-two-shoes. We all want to be seen and known in a certain way in different contexts and by different people. It's very possible that they both are attending to genuine needs in the best way possible: they both are at choice and they both want to respond to life. Both choices have an impact on the other person, and both sisters have blind spots, meaning neither is aware of what is going on with the other. And Martha proceeds to triangulate, the

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<sup>2</sup> Epistle of James 2:17-18.26 and 1 Corinthians 13.

strategy of pulling a third person into a conflict not as a witness (Mt 18) but as a support in favor of the presumed injured party.

Jesus doesn't fall for it. He lovingly reveals her mistake. He doesn't fault her for engaging in the best hospitality possible. Jesus is giving her a people-first way of being hospitable.

His intention is certainly not to pit Martha against Mary or one lifestyle against the other, such as a busy life as opposed to a more reflective and contemplative one. Who of us might not agree that Christians both feel they are expressing their faith most clearly when involved in practical action, and that this helps them learn and grow as disciples?

Martha is extending hospitality to Jesus and to those with him "on their way".<sup>3</sup> Hospitality is a fundamental virtue and social obligation in Mediterranean countries, especially in ancient times,<sup>4</sup> so it seems unlikely that the Jesus would be criticizing her simply for being busy attending to the tasks involved with hospitality rather than quietly listening to him talking or teaching.

What Luke is getting at, moreover, is certainly not overemphasizing the importance of listening over doing since a few verses earlier he has Jesus engage with a lawyer on what it means to love God and neighbor practically through loving deeds in the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:25-37)

The first point we see Luke drive home is that Mary is "sitting at [Jesus'] feet," adopting the posture of a disciple in relation to a rabbi. Although this is not completely without precedent, it contradicts the normal first century Jewish expectations of the role of women; they would learn the Torah through their mother. Hence, Jesus' welcome of women in addition to men as is custom into the circle of his disciples is distinctive and counter-cultural.

Secondly, the issue for Jesus is not so much the activity as it is the *focus*. Luke says that Martha is 'distracted', and Jesus observes that she is 'anxious and troubled'. It would appear then that there is something more going on here and the three key verbs applied to Martha throw some light on this. Each is different and together they build a very vivid picture of her state.

She appears to be "distracted," (in Greek, *perispao*) in the sense of being drawn in different directions and really weighed down. She is also "worried" (in Greek, *merimnao*) in the sense of anxious and again (in English) "distracted" in the Greek sense of troubled (*thoribazo*). So, we have a picture of someone whose attention is being so pulled in multiple directions that they can no longer focus properly on any of them and consequently everything becomes muddled. No wonder she feels cumbered!

Her concern is with 'me': "my sister has left *me*...tell her to help *me*." Rather than her focus being in attending to her guest, Jesus, she is boiling with anxiety and resentment brought about by her expectation that her sister should be as bustling as she is.

Mary, on the other hand, is depicted as someone who is carefully weighing up competing options and then making a considered choice to go with just one of them.

The real contrast here is between distraction caused by the 'many' (thoughts and expectations) rather than focus on the 'one'. Singlemindedness goes a long way.

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<sup>3</sup> We are in the journey section of the gospel of Luke. Being on the way or following the Way is a metaphor for disciple.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus gives that for granted but acknowledges resistance (albeit contrary to culture). See Luke 10:5-11.

So, it's not a matter of being one or the other. We need to be both Mary and Martha: attentive to the Word that welcomes us into a deeper relationship and focused when serving Christ in the world. Whichever we are at the moment, we better not be "distracted" and self-concerned.

Both Martha and Mary have a task at hand that requires focus and energy: Martha's is to offer hospitality through receiving and caring for a guest, and Mary's is to offer hospitality through attentive listening. Both tasks are important, and both demand a quality of presence and proper attention.

May we commit to being present to whatever task we undertake and may we sit at the feet of Jesus and love God with all our mind in addition to all our heart and soul and strength (Lk 10:27). Amen.