

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

(Luke 10:38-42 – preached at Footscray Baptist Church July 17th, 2022 by Cheryl Williams)

Distractions are everywhere. How often do you start to look up something on the computer and get waylaid, looking up things you didn't intend. Or perhaps you are trying to clean up the house and you find something else to do. Or you look for something but find yourself reading an old letter or document. We have phones that serve as a distraction for us all the time.

Martha was distracted, or more accurately incredibly busy. Mary and Martha are entertaining. Hospitality was fundamental to life. Mary and Martha were entertaining Jesus who we can assume had stayed with them a number of times. Martha is the host and she of course as any woman in her position would do, busies herself with providing Jesus with a good square meal. Mary on the other hand is sitting and listening to Jesus' talking. She too is providing hospitality to their guest. She may even have helped Martha earlier, we are not told. As Martha is finishing off her preparations, things reach boiling point - she just needs a little bit more help. Instead of going and asking Mary for help she approaches Jesus with her not so unreasonable request. Why did she ask Jesus? Perhaps she thought she could shame Mary into helping. Maybe she thought that if the request came from Jesus it might be more effective. Maybe she didn't want to be rude and wanted to see if Jesus minded if she took Mary away from him to help her in her final preparations, albeit with an air of frustration.

Instead of getting the help she needed, Jesus tells her to slow down and take time and that Mary is doing the right thing! It is clear from Jesus' reaction, that Mary was not just idly sitting down having a good time - I don't think Jesus would have praised her for that.

Martha's question surely must have been - How can showing hospitality to another and practicing active love be second best?

Often this story is interpreted as being about hospitality and balance. It is often interpreted as being about two ways of operating, both of which are necessary for the balanced Christian life. Martha symbolises the active, busy disciple, whilst Mary on the other hand symbolises the more reflective and contemplative disciple.

Even so, it seems to me that Martha gets bad press. Either, she is too busy to understand the important things in life, or she is too bossy or overly zealous, or she is going about her tasks with a heavy heart. Many of us identify as a 'Martha' and end up feeling inadequate in our journey of faith instead of hearing the invitation of Jesus.

Mary gets the better press. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his every word. Now, it was not unusual for a person to sit at the feet of a teacher and listen and learn. Rabbi's and their students did that all the time. However, no rabbi worth his salt would teach a woman! No rabbi, that is, until Jesus comes along and turns the world upside down.

To leave this story as simply being about balance and hospitality is to miss the radical nature of the story and of Jesus' call.

Can you see the really radical nature of this story? First, Jesus allows a woman to sit at his feet, to learn and to be a disciple. Secondly, and this is the invitation to Martha - Jesus says this is better than being so overwhelmed by cooking tasks.

I imagine that Jesus says to Martha - just come and sit a while, come and join the conversation, share with us your insights, learn from me so that you might be able to go out and teach others about me and God and God's ways. Just have a break for a moment or two - the dishes will wait, come and talk with me, come and learn, come and share.

Jesus the radical one, the courageous one turning the world upside down. Can you imagine the ridicule he would have got for daring to teach a woman? Jesus the reminder of our radical God who desires jumping over or breaking down barriers that divide and separate, to welcome all without discrimination and to encourage everyone – men, women and children to become disciples and learn the stories of faith in such a way as to be able to put them into practice.

Prompting my thinking about this story this week was the hymn – Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus. There is a sense in which that is the invitation of Jesus to both women in this story and to us.

What did Martha see when she looked full at the wonderful face of Jesus? Did she see understanding? Did she see compassion? Did she see rebuke or invitation? Did she see encouragement to come and listen, to come and learn, to come and share your insights? Did she find answers to her questions?

What did Mary see when she looked full at the wonderful face of Jesus? Did she see understanding and compassion? Did she see acceptance? Did she see wisdom? Did she see that he was doing something counter-cultural and radical in having her learn from him as the other male disciples?

What do we see when we look full at that wonderful face of Jesus? Do you find understanding and compassion? Do you see invitation rather than judgement? Do you see someone calling you to join him on a journey turning convention on its head, to turning the world upside down?

Mary and Martha have been remembered down the ages. I like to think that they both were very excited to learn from Jesus, to ask their questions, share their insights and learn. Martha becomes a theologian who is the first one to name Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the one for whom her people had waited. She also goes on to be one of the early church leaders.

It's time to redeem these two women from the reputations centuries of history (often written by males) has given them. Martha is not the bossy complaining woman, she is a thinker and leader, a mentor for us in the faith. Mary is not just a soft, gentle, retiring and overly emotional disciple, she too is a leader and thinker, she too is a mentor in our faith. They are courageous and radical as they take their place as a disciple, listening, learning and teaching others about following God.

Let's not continue the injustice – they are disciples, teachers and leaders. Let's follow their example of hospitality – sharing meals, their home and listening to the Word of God. Let's follow the example of Jesus who broke down traditional barriers. Let's listen for Jesus' invitation to come and sit and listen and learn. Let's focus on Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow slowly dim in the light of his glory and grace. Amen.