

Mary and Martha



On 29th July the Church of England remembers Mary, Martha and Lazarus, companions of our Lord. These two sisters and their brother lived in Bethany and were regularly visited by Jesus. There are three stories in particular, the raising of Lazarus found in John, the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10, and Mary anointing Jesus' feet in John 12.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10: 38-42)

This looks like a dramatic contrast between faith and works (see also David's letter on pages 6-7), with Jesus coming down on the side of faith. But perhaps we should not jump to this conclusion. James in his epistle suggests that *faith without works is dead*, but this is not to side with Martha and value *only* works: perhaps also works without faith are empty. Perhaps we need both faith and works. Perhaps the message is that there are times and places for both.

In the story Jesus is *there*, teaching. When we are in the presence of Jesus it is important to stop and listen. It is easy to allow too much activity to make us blind to the presence and deaf to the teaching of God. We need to make space to stop and listen, to wait upon God.

But this is not the whole story. On another visit to Bethany (John 12:7), when Mary anoints his feet with perfume and is criticised, Jesus says *You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me*. We need also to go out and play our part in the world, turning our faith into a living faith that speaks in our



actions and our compassion for others. We need to make space for contemplation, so that we can grow in faith and our faith can become deeper, but we also need to respond to God's word and show our faith in our lives.

We have shown two contrasting views of the story here: a standard view by Tintoretto, and one by Velasquez, where the focus is very much on Martha.