

XVI ORDINARY TIME – July 17th , 2016

**MARTHA WELCOMED HIM. MARIA HAS CHOSEN THE GOOD PORTION - Biblical Commentary
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Lk 10.38-42

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

Every time we read the gospels we must always put it into the cultural context of the time. If we do not we risk to misinterpret and give an interpretation that is absolutely not in the evangelist's intentions, as in this passage, Luke 10, 38-42. An excerpt from which was born the distinction between the active life, of ordinary people and the contemplative life, those who choose a monastic life, the cloister.

It is nothing like this. Let's read. "*Now as they went on their way,..*" (Jesus and his disciples) "*..Jesus entered a village.*" Here is the first irregularity. They are walking together and only Jesus enters. Why? Jesus excludes the disciples because they are still not able to understand the lesson that he is about to give. "*.. entered a village*" When the word "village" is found in the gospels it is the key that indicates resistance, misunderstanding or hostility to the message that Jesus brings. The village is the place still attached to tradition, to the past. The village is where there is insistence " Why change? It has always been like this"

This village does not have a name because it represents the mentality attached to the past, that sees every novelty with suspicion. "*And a woman named Martha ..*" (Martha means the mistress of the house) "*... welcomed him into her house.*"

From this it is understood that she is the owner of the house. *“And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.”* Here this image that the evangelist gives us of Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, must be understood in the cultural context of the time. It does not mean on Mary's behalf adoration, contemplation or worship of the Lord. Mary puts herself in the position of the disciple towards the teacher. There is for example St. Paul who says in the Acts to have been sitting at the feet of Gamaliel. So sitting at the feet of someone means to recognise him as a teacher.

In the Talmud, the sacred book of law: *“Let thy house be a meeting-house for the wise; and powder thyself in the dust of their feet; and drink their words with thirstiness.”* (quotation from Yose ben Yoezer)

So Mary's behaviour is not an attitude of adoration, but of listening, as a disciple towards a teacher. But it is a thing that Mary must not do. She is a woman and the women do not have the same rights and privileges as men. Women must stay in the kitchen and make themselves invisible. Always in the Talmud we read *‘The words of Torah should burn rather than be taught to women.’*(Yerushalmi, Sotah 3:4.) The Rabbi had said that God had never spoken to a woman.

He had spoken only once to Sarah, but, then he repented, because of Sarah's lie, so since then he had not spoken to a woman. Therefore Mary is doing something scandalous. She violates the traditional role always confined women and takes on the attitude of the male, a man, the disciple

Martha on the other hand was faithful to the tradition. *“But Martha was distracted with much serving.”*

Martha goes so far as to rebuke Jesus, considering him responsible for the absence of her sister. *“And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care...”* And here is a multiplying of the personal pronouns" me, to me, " she is all centred on herself. *“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?”* and then, with the imperative: *“ Tell her then to help me.”* Martha does not tolerate that her sister has violated the rules, the rules that tradition and morality have assigned to women, that Mary is in the role of a man, a disciple, and asks Jesus to send her back into the role where tradition has always placed women.

But Jesus does not rebuke Mary, but will rebuke her sister.

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha,” Repeating the name means a reproach. As when Jesus seeing the city will say *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”* So it is an expression of reproach. *“... you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.”* There is only one need. And here is the sentence: *“Mary has chosen the good portion,(the best part) which will not be taken away from her.”*

Now there is to understand what is it that cannot be taken away. What is it that cannot be taken away from a person? Because life also can be taken from a person. Why does Jesus say that Mary has chosen the part that cannot be taken away? Because Mary has chosen freedom, through violation of the rules and regulations of conduct. It is one thing when we are granted freedom – when granted it can also be withdrawn – it is another thing when freedom is the result of a personal achievement, having the courage to violate the rules of tradition and religion.

So when one achieves this freedom no one can take it away. Then that of Jesus - as we said at the beginning - is not a preference for a contemplative life at the expense of the active one, but it is an invitation to make the choice of freedom. And it is interesting that to make this choice of freedom the evangelist places us not as a man, but as a woman.