

MARTHA WELCOMED HIM INTO HER HOUSE....MARY HAS CHOSEN THE GOOD PORTION – Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 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."

Whenever we read the gospel we must always think of the cultural context of the time. If we do not do so we risk giving an interpretation that is absolutely not in the intentions of the evangelist, as in this passage, Luke 10, 38-42. A passage from which was born the distinction between the active life, those of ordinary, normal people, and the contemplative life, those who choose a monastic life, the enclosure, with a clear preference of Jesus for the latter.

Nothing of all this. Let's read. "*.. as they went on their way..*" (Jesus and his disciples) "*.. entered a village.*" Here is the first inconsistency. They are on their way and only Jesus enters. Why? Jesus excludes the disciples because they are not yet able to understand the lesson that he is now giving. "*.. entered a village.*" When in the gospels we find the word "*village.*" it is a clue that the evangelists give us to indicate resistance, misunderstanding or hostility to Jesus' announcement of the novelty that he brings, because the village is the place attached to tradition, to the past. The village is where the imperative applies "Why change? It has always been like that! " This village has no name precisely because it was representative of a mentality attached to the past, which sees every novelty with suspicion. "*And a woman named Martha...*" the name is significant, Martha means "the lady and hostess of the house." "*...welcomed him into her house.*"

From this we understand that she is the owner of the house. "*... she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.*" Here is this image that the evangelist gives us of Mary, sitting at the feet of the Lord, to be understood in the cultural context of the time. It does not mean adoration on the part of Mary or contemplation or veneration for the Lord. Mary puts herself in the position of the disciple towards the master. For example, St. Paul says in the Acts that he was , "*...educated at the feet of Gamaliel*" (Acts 22,3) So sitting at someone's feet meant recognizing him as a teacher.

And in the Talmud, the Holy book of the law "*Let your house be a meeting place for the learned, dusted with the dust of their feet and drink their word with thirst.*"

So the attitude of Mary is not an attitude of adoration, but of listening, like a disciple towards a teacher. But it is a strange thing that Mary does, because she should not. She is a woman and

women do not have the same rights and privileges as men. The woman must stay in the kitchen, must make herself invisible. Always in the Talmud it is written “*..the words of the law are destroyed by fire rather than taught to women.*” The rabbis boasted that God never spoke to a woman.

He had done it only once, to Sara, but then he had repented, for Sara's lie, and from that time he had never addressed a woman again. So Mary is doing something outrageous here. It violates the role where tradition has always confined women and takes the attitude of the male, the man, the disciple.

Instead Martha is faithful to tradition “*But Martha was distracted with much serving.*”

Martha even goes so far as to reproach Jesus, holding him responsible for the absence of her sister “*...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.”* And then the imperative: “*Tell her then to help me.*” Martha does not tolerate that her sister has transgressed the rules, the rules that tradition and morals that have been assigned to women, that Mary plays the role of a man, a disciple, and asks Jesus to push her back into the role where tradition has always placed women. But Jesus, instead of reproaching Mary, rebukes his sister.

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

Then there is to understand what it is that cannot be taken away. What can't be taken away from a person? Because life can also be taken from a person. Why does Jesus say that Mary chose a part that cannot be taken from her? Because Mary chose freedom, through the transgression of rules and rules of behaviour. An account is freedom when it is granted - when it is granted it can also be withdrawn - an account is when freedom is the result of a personal achievement, having the courage to break the rules of tradition and the rules of religion.

Then 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 is an invitation to make the choice of freedom. And it is interesting that to make this choice of freedom the evangelist does not place us a man, but a woman.

Allora quando uno conquista questa libertà nessuno gliela può togliere. Allora quella di Gesù – come abbiamo detto all’inizio – non è una preferenza per una vita contemplativa a scapito di quella

attiva, ma è un invito a fare la scelta della libertà. Ed è interessante che per fare questa scelta della libertà l'evangelista non ci ponga un uomo, ma una donna.