

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

When I began at secondary school, I was given a homework diary. It was designed as a record of all the homework I was assigned and had completed, and my parents had to sign it each week. Within it were the expectations of the school about the amount of work that would be involved. When you started at the school, you would have two pieces of homework a night, each lasting thirty minutes. But by the time you revised for public examinations, that would increase to what the headmaster gleefully called “endless toil”.

I suspect many churchgoers see the Christian faith as a matter of ‘endless toil’. Not simply the relentless list of jobs to be done in church (as some people here know only too well), but the sense that you will never have done enough in order to please God. The Methodist ordination service says that the ministry will make great demands on ministers and their families, and while it goes on to promise the help of the Holy Spirit, it nevertheless leaves an impression that genuine ministry is about ‘busyness’. That’s certainly the way congregations often measure their ministers – are they busy? More worryingly, it’s often the way ministers measure their own value. Am I busy? A full diary becomes a sign of spirituality.

So we come to Martha and Mary. We may be tempted to think that the contrast is between Martha, who is on her feet, and Mary, who sits at Jesus’ feet. If we value the idea of being busy, we will have a problem with Jesus’ commendation of Mary. A church member I once knew said she felt sure Luke didn’t record the whole story, and that Jesus would have asked Mary to go and help Martha.

But the story is not a contrast between Martha ‘doing’ and Mary ‘being’. It cannot be. It occurs immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan (which was last week’s Lectionary Gospel reading, and you may have had [a sermon](#) on it). Jesus can hardly commend the radical action of the Samaritan one day, and condemn Martha for being busy the next day. Maybe instead this story balances the Good Samaritan story.

Martha’s problem is not that she has a lot to do. It is that she is ‘*distracted*’ by her many tasks’ (verse 40), as Luke puts it. Jesus tells her she is ‘worried and distracted by many things’ (verse 41). The worry and the distraction are the core issues. Martha is frantic and fretful. And that’s where Jesus picks her up.

In some respects, worry and distraction are only human. How often have you said to someone – perhaps a loved one – “You drive me to distraction”? Maybe a son or daughter gives you cause for concern. Perhaps you don’t have enough money for all you think you need. It wouldn’t be surprising if worry took over.

Or it might be that you believe that your acceptance by God depends on whether you are a good enough person. You devote all your energies to doing what you believe are the right things. However, it’s a tyranny, because you never know whether you have reached an acceptable standard. Probably you haven’t, and so with even more worry you redouble your

efforts. All the time you do this, you might say you believe in the love of God, but really your whole existence is being lived in complete doubt as to whether God loves you or not. Your image of God is actually of a tyrant.

Think of some attitudes we encounter in the church. We are told that we should not be slapdash in our preparing to meet God – quite rightly: excellence is a noble thing. But someone then says to us, “You wouldn’t be so careless if the Queen were coming to your house; why are you about meeting the King of Kings?” We then feel that nothing we can ever do is good enough for God. Either we strive even more, or we give up in despair.

If it’s not a matter of fear, it might be a question of pride. If I can earn my own place of favour with God, how good am I? it’s tantamount to saying, “I don’t need the Cross of Christ. I can make my own way to God on my own.” It’s as if we dare to stand before Jesus on the Day of Judgement and say, “Lord, it was awfully decent of you to die on the Cross for the sins of the world, but you really didn’t need to, old chap.”

Another way of looking at the motives behind being distracted by the tasks we have to do is to see it in terms of urgency. There is so much that needs doing, and so little time. So I have to crack on. I can’t let up. Something will be missed if I don’t keep at it relentlessly.

But of course, while this may sound like an efficient use of time, it is both foolish and dangerous. It is like saying, “I have a long car journey to make today. I cannot afford to stop for a rest, and neither do I have the time to call in at a petrol station and refuel.” This is the plague of being distracted with busyness: our commitment to keep on do-do-doing all the time may be for honourable intentions, but it sucks us dry. It leaves us with nothing to feed on, and nothing to offer. Is it any wonder many churches seem as arid as the desert when the distractions of busyness dominate such places?

All of which brings us to **Mary’s** honoured place in this story. We pause a moment to note how revolutionary it was that Jesus was teaching her in the first place. Women did not normally have the privilege of being taught by a rabbi. But Jesus was different. He was ushering in a kingdom that was open to female and male, child and adult, Gentile and Jew. Martha in her fretting and worrying had missed the fact that Jesus was teaching a woman – like her! She could have had this privilege, but her over-busy lifestyle means she misses this radical implication of the Gospel. It makes you wonder how much of the Good News we also miss, because we are too obsessed with doing this, that and everything.

So what makes Mary’s grabbing of her Gospel privilege as a daughter of God so important? For one thing, she understands something about *grace*. She knows that before anything else, a disciple needs to receive from Jesus. Discipleship doesn’t start or depend on all the effort we make for God: it begins with God graciously and lovingly approaching us in Christ, especially in the Cross. For there we learn that we are not people who are capable of pleasing God by our own efforts. We need God’s forgiveness in Christ through his death in

our place. Everything starts there for the Christian. And it sets a pattern for the whole of life. It all begins with Jesus, not us. In a simple way, I believe Mary knew that.

Therefore, alongside the joy Mary has being a woman whom Jesus has chosen to teach, there is a basic humility. If Martha stands over Jesus, Mary sits at his feet. Everything worthwhile will come from Jesus taking the initiative and listening to him. Jesus himself said he only did what he saw the Father doing; it becomes the rôle of the disciple to listen to Jesus first and then respond.

All of which tells us that Mary's action is not a case of 'being' rather than 'doing'. It is 'being' before 'doing'. She takes the old maxim of 'Don't just sit there, do something' and reverses it into 'Don't just do something, sit there'.

Why? She knows that you can't set off on all those good and noble tasks that Martha has plunged herself into unless you have first received direction from Jesus. What does he want me to do? There are plenty of good things to do in the world, but I cannot do them all. Which ones does he want me to take on? When you know that, you are freed from the frazzling effect of a Martha-like frantic lifestyle. There is no danger that Mary will simply stay at the feet of Jesus and not turn it into action – she won't be a hypocrite like that. But she knows what needs to come first.

Put it this way: the English word 'obedience' has its roots in the Latin word 'audire' - which means 'to hear'. Mary has to hear from Jesus first, before plunging into work.

Not only that, Mary knows that you need a balance in your Christian life that features both being and doing. We need both action and reflection. It is something the early church came to understand very quickly. Think of the story in Acts chapter 6 where there is a crisis over the distribution of food to Greek-speaking widows. The apostles resist the idea that they must do everything. They ensure that the food distribution project continues by having the community appoint a team of Spirit-filled people to undertake it. For themselves, though, they cannot compromise their call to 'the ministry of the Word and prayer'. Between the apostles and the team appointed to serve the widows, the balance is held: the community together embraces both listening to God and practical action for the kingdom of God.

What it amounts to is this: you can't just be a 'being' person and you can't just be a 'doing' person. Nor can the church just be one or the other. If all we do is listen, pray and contemplate, we will be too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. If all we do is plunge ourselves into action, we shall burn out. The Marys of this world know that you have to fill up the car before you can set out on the journey.

I hope the implications for all of us are clear, especially because I believe this is often important for Methodists. Surveys in recent years have shown that generally we are a people who are good at social action but less comfortable with prayer. Jesus wants Marys,

but Methodists are often Marthas. Too many of us therefore become discouraged, exhausted and burnt out.

We need to find our ways of sitting at the feet of Jesus before we do anything else. Exactly how we do it will vary from person to person, because we have different personalities and temperaments, and our life circumstances are not the same. But we need our own 'ministry of the Word and prayer' in some form: we need to reflect on the Scriptures and how they are pointing us to Jesus, and we need to pray. These things need to be more than just something that is done for us on a Sunday, and they need to be more than at crisis times. In my experience, we need to aim for a daily pattern of devotion.

So you may find that first thing in the morning works best. You may like to reflect prayerfully on the day at its end. You may be one of those people who likes to read the Scriptures and pray during a lunch break, reviewing how things have gone so far and looking forward to the rest of the day.

You may use Bible reading notes, a daily Lectionary, a [website](#) or some other pattern. You may find one approach to prayer works better than another for you. Just so long as it's Christ-centred, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that the time of Bible reading and prayer doesn't just feed your head with interesting tidbits of information, it draws you close to Jesus.

For if it does, you will soon find that by sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary, he will then raise you to your feet for action.

And – unlike Martha – you will be ready and equipped.