

Encounter with Jesus – Martha

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at several people who met Jesus physically during his ministry, through others after his death and in the Old Testament. Last time we looked at Mary of Bethany, who had at least 3 encounters with Jesus. The discussion prompted some questions about giving up things for God, so tonight we are going to follow it up by looking at Martha, Mary's sister. Hilary is going to read us her story.

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-45; John 12:1-8

Who was Martha?

We are looking at the same 3 encounters as last time, but from Martha's point of view - first when Martha opened her home to Jesus, and probably the disciples who travelled with Him; secondly as the sister of Lazarus who Jesus raises from the dead and thirdly as a servant honouring Jesus with a meal. I mentioned last time that neither Luke nor John makes any reference to a husband or father of Martha or Mary and it appears they were living on their own, so would have been well off – like other women who are mentioned as travelling with Jesus and providing funds to support him and the disciples - If a woman married her possessions became her husbands, so to live on your own as a woman you would have had to inherit quite a lot of money. The passage about the raising of Lazarus says “many Jews had come to Martha and Mary”, it is possible these may have been professional mourners (in which case Mary and Martha had the means to pay them), but as we are told they had come from Jerusalem two miles away, the news of Lazarus' death must have been spread and so they were probably people who knew him and his sisters. This again implies a family of status or influence.

How did she encounter Jesus?

The first passage tells us Jesus stayed at her home while travelling through Bethany early in his ministry – she exercised the gift of hospitality, an important cultural duty at the time. Jesus would have passed through Bethany several times on his journeys as it was the last village before Jerusalem on the route up from the Jordan through Jericho. He probably stayed there in the last week of his life, travelling into Jerusalem each day (Mt 21:17 tells us that after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem he went out to Bethany where he spent the night). Jn 11: 5 records that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus”, so he obviously got to know them well. The second encounter is initiated by Martha and Mary, when Lazarus became ill they send word to Jesus, presumably asking him to come and heal him. The third encounter is during Holy Week, a dinner was given in Jesus' honour, according to Matthew and Mark's accounts it was in “the home of a man known as Simon the Leper” and Lazarus was there. But Martha is again serving, so the relationship between Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Jesus must have been very close. Martha is acting as the host.

What happened during the encounter?

As we saw last time in the first passage Martha was so distressed, “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” and frustrated that her sister wasn't helping that she actually rebuked Jesus, accusing Him of not caring that Mary sat at His feet while she did all the work. Jesus' response makes clear he won't tell Mary to help Martha, but he doesn't tell her off for asking or even implying he doesn't care about her. He recognises her frustration comes from worrying about many things. Being one of Jesus' hostesses would have been a lot of work for Martha; he had brought many disciples to feed and the cultural importance of hospitality would have increased the pressure. Her rebuke of Jesus gives us insight into her heart and mind as she tried to make everything perfect and was so distracted by this that she lost sight of who she was speaking to. Martha's behaviour may fall short of Mary's in this passage, but her labour represents the best display of devotion she knows how to offer to Jesus. He does not criticise

her and tell her to sit down like Mary and listen to him, but calms her – “Martha, Martha, “. Her serving rather than listening was not a problem to him, but her attitude was.

In the second encounter, when Martha hears that Jesus has come she goes out to meet him while Mary stays at home. It is Martha, not Mary, who first tells Jesus "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And she goes on "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." So she has faith in Jesus and expresses it to him directly. Jesus seems to acknowledge her faith by saying "**Your brother will rise again**", already knowing what he was going to do, having told the disciples before they set out that this sickness would not end in death and that he was going to wake Lazarus. Martha's response is the common belief of Judaism that the dead will be raised bodily at the end of time. Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?**" A direct challenge to her this time and she responds "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." – the same confession that Peter made and Jesus said was a revelation from God in Matt 16. Martha then goes and fetches Mary, who makes the same statement that Lazarus wouldn't have died if Jesus had been there, but does not go on to say the second part about God giving Jesus whatever he asks. So it appears that Martha has more faith at this point than Mary. However when Jesus tells them to roll the stone away it is Martha who responds saying there is a bad odour – but Jesus says, "**Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?**" – challenging her again to believe. Martha then had the joy of seeing her brother raised from the dead, confirming what she had said to Jesus when she met him – that God would give Jesus whatever he asked.

The third encounter is just days before Christ's crucifixion ([Matthew 26:1-6](#); [Mark 14:3-9](#); [John 12:1-8](#)). Martha was again serving the meal while the resurrected Lazarus reclined at the table with Jesus and the disciples. Mary breaks open the alabaster jar, pours a pint of very expensive perfume on Jesus' head and feet, and wipes them with her hair. In contrast to the first encounter, Martha does not complain to Jesus. She accepts that Mary is worshipping Jesus in the best way she can and Martha is doing the same by doing what she does best – serving and meeting people's needs.

What effect did the encounter have on Martha?

Martha was obviously upset about Mary not helping her in the first encounter, but wasn't doing the wrong thing, it was just her attitude that was wrong. Jesus gently calms her and it seems Martha learns the lesson by her response in the third encounter. She offers Jesus what she can do best, serving, while Mary offers what she can, attention and worship. We are all individuals made uniquely by God, none of us are the same and we all have gifts given to us by God for the benefit of others. It is important to recognise the gifts we and others have and that we can't all be treated the same or expected to do the same things. As individuals we need to give our own gifts to God as part of his body for the benefit of the whole body, working together for God's glory. We are still individuals and we hear God differently, but the whole is greater than the individual parts. Each one of us needs to do the work God has called us to do, whether that is leading services, visiting people at home, making coffee, doing the flowers, helping with Sunday School or Messy Church etc. Just as parents treat their children differently according to their personality and abilities, so God treats us differently to bring the good plans he has for us to fruition. [Video – Moving On 2 extract, The Body]

Discussion – There are two questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

What gifts or abilities has God given you for the body?

How are you using them?