

Martha's story - our story.

Ruth Gouldbourne, Bloomsbury, London. A sermon preached at IBTS, Prague, May 2006

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10.38-42. NRSV

I love this story - I love the image of this socially radical woman, a strong woman, somebody who says I don't care what the conventional expectations are, I'm going to do what may seem scandalous, but I believe to be right. Here is somebody who sees in Jesus, hears in Jesus the permission to be a person in her own right, to take her own decisions, not those dictated by society, who finds in Jesus an encounter with God that affirms her humanity, and gives her a place and a worth. I think Martha and Martha's story is wonderful. Look at how Luke tells it.

Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Jerusalem, and Martha welcomes them into her home. There's something very odd going on here - a woman with her own home is probably in a pretty socially anomalous position. Is she a widow, an orphan, an abandoned wife? Whatever, she isn't fitting the norms of her community. She's on the edge, and people on the edge really ought to behave properly, or there will be trouble. So what does this woman who really can't afford any more scandal do? She invites an unmarried man - perhaps a whole group of unmarried men - into her house. What's more, he's a wandering teacher who has already begun to raise official eyebrows, and is turning out not to be entirely the sort of person that respectable people want to be seen with. He's begun to challenge the authorities, and there is some question about whether he is altogether safe.

Martha takes this enormous risk, puts herself outside the social norms and invites Jesus in, regardless of what it will do to her reputation - and that of her sister, for whom she appears to have some sort of responsibility, if she is the head of the household.

And Jesus comes. He accepts the offer she makes, not just of the hospitality, but of who she is. This is not a straightforward invitation to a meal with no consequences. This costs. People will notice. There will be talk. Jesus honours this, and accepts the gift that Martha offers. He comes in, and he treats the occasion seriously. He doesn't just sit back, and allow everything to be half-hearted and safe. He comes in and he teaches. He is himself, and speaks of the things that are in his heart. He doesn't try to protect Martha from the consequences of her decision, but takes what she offers seriously and gives her what she asks for. There is in this such a gentleness, such a generosity, such an honouring of the individual that it is profoundly moving. In this encounter, we see an individual, refusing the limits put on her by her social normality because she senses in the invitation of Jesus the

possibility of something new, and determines to receive it. And in Jesus, we see a receiving of that which is offered, an honouring of the person and recognition of dignity that is so much of the way in which God deals with us - with courtesy, gentleness and seriousness; in this meeting, Jesus is reaffirming that when we offer something of ourselves to God and to the mission of God, it is received and used and honoured.

Of course, it does go rather wrong. This courageous and socially radical woman gets in a bit of a muddle once Jesus accepts her offer. And I have to confess this is the reason why I really warm to Martha. She can see new possibilities. She catches a glimpse of the kind of person she might be in relation to Jesus, and that will give her a new place in the world. And she wants it. She wants to be the person she sees she can be in Jesus presence, or she wouldn't have invited him in the first place.

But then something happens - her nerve fails, the inner voices of what is right and proper get too strong. She invites Jesus in - but then she gets lost in the business of "serving" - cooking the meal, preparing the sleeping arrangements, whatever it was - and she can't actually spend time with Jesus. She gets frustrated, irritated, angry -and we have the record of the argument she starts to have. Who is she angry with? -Mary, for not helping? herself for getting all worked up? Jesus for not noticing? Luke doesn't give us that detail, but we can hear that she is unhappy, she is flustered and distracted - and so she goes to Jesus, this man she has defied convention to invite in, this man she wants to know better and spend time with - and she tells him what he ought to be doing in her home. "Don't you care what is happening to me. Tell her to help." She has invited Jesus in to listen to him. She has invited Jesus in because somewhere, somehow, she has recognised that there is a different possibility for who and how she might be - and here she is accusing him of not relating to her, not recognising her, and telling him what he ought to say.

How did she get here? How did she get to the point where, having defied all sorts of social convention to invite Jesus in, she is trapped by her own expectations and patterns of behaviour into missing the opportunity she has been taking risks to gain? Again, Luke doesn't tell us. And it would be unwarranted to try and read too much in. But Jesus does tell her - very gently and lovingly- that she is distracted. She certainly seems to have her mind and attention on several things - on the presence of Jesus, because it is to him that she speaks; on the things that need to be done, because it of them that she speaks; on her sister, and her sister's lack of proper behaviour, because that is at the heart of her complaint. And Jesus points out to her that this scattering of attention, scattering of energy is not what is needed. And then there is the difficult bit of the story - Mary is praised.

Mary is a pretty unconventional woman too. She sits, according to Luke, at Jesus' feet listening to him teach. This is the technical description of the behaviour of a disciple. And it is not the sort of thing that a decent woman did - nor indeed, that a decent rabbi allowed. Mary too is defying expectation - not by not helping with the housework, or at least only indirectly, but by taking the invitation of Jesus seriously to be a disciple. And she is recognised for that - and praised for it.

But the story isn't really about her. It is about Martha, Martha's choices and Martha's dilemma. Having made the choice to invite Jesus in, she appears to want to carry on with her life the way she thinks it ought to be. And who can blame her? If you invite somebody into your home, it is proper to care for them. It would surely not simply be a breach of social norms but of hospitality to have invited him in, and then not to have taken the responsibility

of being a host seriously. So Martha makes the choice to invite Jesus in - but then assumes that her old patterns of behaviour and thinking are going to be appropriate to the situation. And they are not. That is what we hear in the words about Mary. Mary has spotted something new, and is prepared to go with it, to let go of her expectations and assumptions and see what happens - even in the face of disapproval of the one who is perhaps closer to her than anybody else. Is that what she is being praised for? Certainly, there seems to be approval for her willingness to let Jesus set the agenda rather than trying to make things fit according to her own preconceptions. Whereas Martha - well, Martha has invited Jesus in, but perhaps has not realised the implications of that. If she invited him in, and then spends all the time trying to care for him, what is the agenda she has - that Jesus can come on her terms; that she will remain in control; that Jesus will keep her rules.

Which of course is the other reason why I love the story. Here is this marvellous, strong, unconventional woman, who is a fantastic role model -and who gets it wrong! She does this amazing thing of inviting Jesus in, breaking the rules and challenging assumptions - and then she gets cross when her sister does the same thing. It's as if having invited Jesus in, she can't cope with the consequences of it, can't manage the reality of it. Because when Jesus is there, the rules change, and what she had thought life ought to be about turns out not to be the case. By taking the risk that she has, she has stepped into a new world, and it doesn't work the same way. And that's true not just for her, but for everybody else as well, because relating to Jesus is about being part of the community, and it means all the rules are rewritten and the roles challenged. And while that might be OK in theory, what Martha discovers is that it is not always easy in practice.

It turns out that the real risk she has taken is not to her reputation, by inviting this man into her house. It's not in the end even to her sister's reputation, despite the scandalous behaviour she shows of sitting at Jesus' feet. It is actually to the way the world is constructed and works. Because, by inviting Jesus in, she is having to let go of the belief that she can make her own rules and sort things out to suit herself. And that really is a risk. And of course it is not just Martha's. Mary is taking it too. Sitting at Jesus' feet and learning means learning what Jesus is teaching, and so she cannot go as if nothing has happened. She cannot get to the end of the evening and say "very interesting" and go back to her previous way of life. Both of them have taken very obvious risks - but both of them have taken a deeper risk - the risk of meeting Jesus, and finding that life cannot be the same again.

We see it most clearly with Martha, since the story is about her. She cannot order her life according to her expectations of who she is, and what she wants to happen. She cannot invite Jesus in and then tell him what to do. She cannot make others behave in a way she considers appropriate. She cannot be who she was, live how she lived, before she took this risk. And that's the problem with meeting Jesus, with inviting him in - we can't be quite sure how it's going to turn out. We can't control what he's going to do or ask of us. We can't tell him so far and no further. We can't allow him to be part of our experience and then expect our experience to be unchanged. And we can't meet him in isolation from our other relationships and how they function.

Meeting Jesus is important for most of us - that is something about why we are here. We might speak of it in a variety of ways, and have different language to describe what we mean. But there is something about this man which draws us to him - the way he is, the

way he teaches, the sense that in him we are in touch with that which is the heart of reality. And for many of us, meeting him in whatever way is doing something socially odd and strange and might mean that people talk, and judge us. After all, the very act of coming to church is, in our society, not normal behaviour, even if it is acceptable. It is strange. It may not entail the kind of risk that Martha is taking - though sometimes it does - but it does challenge the norms of our wider community.

But the real risk doesn't lie in this, any more than it did for Martha. It lies in the consequences of the action. If we take seriously the opportunity to be with Jesus - to invite him into our lives, whatever we mean by that; to live according to his teaching, to open ourselves to the encounter with the reality that he brings to us; to offer ourselves to the work that he does - any or all of that - then we take the risk that we cannot go on ordering our world, our experiences, our way of being according to our own decisions and assumptions. We take a risk in relating to this man because he doesn't behave in ways we expect. He calls us into new relationships, based on values and choices that we might not have chosen for ourselves. He calls us into new ways of behaving that challenge many of the assumptions we have about who we are, and what it means to be successful. He calls us into new ways of relating to God, because we meet God with a different face. If we take the risk that Martha knew she was taking, we too will find that who we are, who others are, how we live and think and act - all of that will be challenged and reordered. It may be strange, it may make us uneasy, even angry. But the promise of the story is that it is about life and fulfilment and freedom. Which suggests that it is a risk worth taking.