

“Martha was distracted by her many tasks.”

I have always had a great sympathy for Martha. There’s nothing more galling than having guests descend on one suddenly, and the other members of the household leave all the necessary preparations to one person.

Clearly, Martha and Mary had very different temperaments even though they were sisters. Martha was a bundle of energy, always on the go, whilst Mary was much more contemplative and quiet.

It’s hard for an active person to understand someone who sits and thinks. When I was at College I can remember one of the staff getting annoyed because his wife didn’t grasp that when he was in his study reading, he was at work. She clearly thought that he was trying to avoid helping her with the children and simply hiding away. It might have been better if he’d found a study away from home.

It’s equally true that a person who is more contemplative and thoughtful doesn’t really understand the person who is always on the go. This is just one of those facts of life. And it is hard to enter into the experience of someone else, especially those different from oneself. Yet there ought to be a willingness by us all to try, since this is one way in which good relations can be fostered.

A prayer for the active person might read:

Lord of all pots and pans and things,  
Since I’ve no time to be  
A saint by doing lovely things,  
Or watching late with thee,  
Or dreaming in the dawnlight,  
Or storming heaven’s gates,  
Make me a saint by getting meals  
And washing up the plates.

Meanwhile, the quiet person will sit and think and pray and hold up the world before God:

Arrested suns and tranquilled seas declare  
To heaven and earth th'omnipotence of prayer,  
That gives the hopeless hope, the feeble might,  
Outruns the swift and puts the strong to flight,  
The noontide arrow foils and plague that stalks by  
night.

Both have their place in the great pattern of daily life.

But there is a danger in categorising oneself. The active person can get lazy about saying prayers or finding time to be regular at worship; whilst the more thoughtful person can use this as an excuse to avoid helping with the necessary chores.

This is certainly what Martha thought of Mary. After all, hospitality demanded a welcome, and visitors had to be fed. It was also clear that both sisters felt honoured that Jesus was their guest.

Martha's fault lay in a lack of perception.. She was rightly getting on with her duties but did so in a way which unsettled everyone. Because she was annoyed with Mary, Martha banded and fussed so much that Jesus had to intervene.

Remember that at this time Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he knew there was likely to be a showdown with the authorities. He was thus under tremendous pressure, plus the attention of the crowds which seemed to accompany him wherever he went. So here, at home with the sisters, was a chance to shut the door on the world and to relax for a few hours.

Mary, probably intuitively, knew this and tried to provide the peace and quiet, whilst Martha, doing her best, only made things worse. So Jesus tells her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. Only one thing is necessary."

Perhaps Jesus is saying to Martha: “Don’t lay on a lavish meal; a simple supper is all I require.” And then adding the reference to Mary having chosen the better part, was simply underlining his need for peace and quiet and a chance to recover.

The problem was a lack of awareness. Like the man who spied a farmer and said to him: “I have come a long way and am thinking of settling in the next town. Tell me, what kind of people are there?” The farmer asked him: “What kind of people were in the town you left?” “Oh, it wasn’t so good. The people there were selfish, indifferent just out for themselves. They couldn’t care less about you.” The farmer said: “ You’ll find the same kind of folk in the next town.” The man thanked him and went in another direction.

Later that day another traveller passed by and made the same request to the farmer. He asked him how the people were in the last town. The man replied: “It was hard to leave. The people were there for you in good and bad times. It wasn’t perfect, but it was basically friendly and helpful.” The farmer told him: “You’ll find the same kind of people in the next town.”

Poor Martha, she wanted to be helpful, but by doing what she believed Jesus wanted, she was blind to his real needs. I’ve mentioned before the time when my wife and I were both feeling rotten – I think from having a typhoid injection - when a friend knocked on the door, and had brought us a meal. This indeed was a kind and generous act; but it was not what we needed, as neither of us could face such a meal. We just needed to recover in peace.

The problem is that when kind actions are not well received we take offence and feel that we are not appreciated. It all comes down to the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes; to try to enter into their experience. This is not impossible, but it takes imagination and a few moments thought before acting. We may then be able to respond in a way which meets their need.

In any care, all of us with busy lives can pray with sir Jacob Astley before the Battle of Edgehill in 1642: "O Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me."

Here's a cautionary take to end with about a typical 21<sup>st</sup> Century businessman who saw the good life in terms of money and success.

John O'Neill wrote that one of the perks of his success was a company car with a driver. He loved giving lifts to colleagues to show how successful he was; and he wanted to be on friendly terms with the driver as part of his admiring audience.

No matter how hard he tried to chat to the driver, he remained somewhat cold and distant, though always polite. So one day he asked the driver if he had offended him. The driver tried to dodge the question, but John O'Neill persisted, so finally and reluctantly, the driver replied: "All you seem to think about is work, and it doesn't even look as though you are enjoying yourself. I guess you're nice enough, but frankly, from my point of view, your life is boring."

And when the immediate horror of the events in Nice the past week subside and more rational thought can take place, isn't it a lack of awareness of those amongst whom we live which has led to a loss of a true sense of community, and which causes so much disaffection? This has been fostered by the emphasis in recent years on self-fulfillment, my right to happiness, my needs, and the desire to "have it all now"!

If we are once again truly to care for one another, of whatever race or religion, it is the cultivation of an awareness of another's needs and the willingness to do what we can to see these fulfilled.