

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jul 29th 2015

Today we celebrate the life of Saint Martha who was one of Jesus' earliest and most loyal disciples. Martha was the sister of Mary and Lazarus. Jesus loved Martha and her siblings and often stayed in their home. It was a place where he could relax, enjoy some good company, and get a fine meal. With few exceptions, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were Jesus' closest friends.

There are two possible Gospel readings for today. They show us a saint who had great faith but was not perfect. Martha believed in Jesus but she was not without her weaknesses. She was no plastic saint.

The passage from John's Gospel shows us the Martha who has great confidence in Jesus. It is the story of her brother's death. Jesus was not present when Lazarus died but arrived several days later. Upon hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha got up immediately and went to meet him. She believes that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been present. She also knows that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for. However, even with such great faith in Jesus, she seems not to realize that Jesus has power over death. When Jesus states that Lazarus will rise, she thinks that he is talking about the general resurrection at the end of time. Even though she misunderstands, Jesus told her:

"I am the resurrection and the life;
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,
and anyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?"

Martha does not understand the immediate implications of Jesus' statement but she believes him. She calls him Lord, the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world. She is a saint because she puts her trust in Jesus. She has faith that is seeking understanding.

However, sanctity does not mean that a person has no faults, commits no sins, has no need of redemption, or basically has it all together. Far from it. Martha is no exception. In the Luke Gospel passage, Jesus comes to visit Martha and Mary. Martha is a very hospitable person and she welcomes her friend. Jesus enters the house, sits down, and begins to teach. Mary sits and listens to him. Martha keeps scurrying around and becomes "burdened with much serving." Martha gets irritated by Mary who keeps sitting and listening to Jesus instead of jumping up and helping her and she asks Jesus if he really cares about her. Jesus, if you actually cared about me, you would tell Mary to help me. She probably did not care for Jesus' response: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." Jesus is not valuing contemplation over service. He is pointing out that Martha has gotten out of sorts because of the "many things." She has lost her focus on Jesus and gotten all wrapped up in a hundred details. Martha truly wants to serve Jesus but she loses sight of what is really important, namely, listening to him. She is anxious and worried in the presence of the Lord of heaven and earth.

Martha is not perfect. But she loves Jesus, trusts him, and strives to serve him. She is a beautiful example of a saint. Warts and all, Martha lives a holy life. I can almost hear her good friend say, "Go, and do likewise."

