

“There is need of only one thing.” (Lk. 10:42)

Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem where his mission will be fulfilled. On the journey, he stops in a village at the home of Martha and Mary. The evangelist, Luke, describes the reception that the two sisters give to Jesus: Martha taking on the traditional role of housekeeper and providing hospitality was ‘distracted by her many tasks’, while Mary, ‘sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he was saying’ (v. 39). Mary’s attentiveness contrasts with Martha’s agitation and, in fact, Martha complains about being left alone to serve. Jesus replies, ‘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.’ (vv. 41-42). This passage is situated between the parable of the Good Samaritan which is arguably one of the greatest descriptions of love of neighbour, and the passage recounting how Jesus taught the disciples to pray, which is certainly the greatest explanation of the relationship with God the Father: thus, it is almost like a pivotal point on the scales, balancing love for our neighbour and love for God.

There is need of only one thing.

The protagonists of this Gospel passage are two women. The dialogue that takes place between Jesus and Martha describes the friendship that allows the latter to complain to the Master. But what is the service that Jesus would like? For him it is important that Martha should not worry, that she should set aside the traditional tasks assigned to women and that she too should listen to his word like Mary who is taking on a new role as a disciple. The message of this text has often been reduced to contrasting active and contemplative life, almost as if they were two alternative religious approaches. However, both Martha and Mary love Jesus and want to serve him. The Gospel does not say that prayer and listening to the Word are more important than charity, but rather that we need to find a way to link these two loves in an indissoluble way. The two loves - love of God and love of neighbour - are not opposed to each other but are complementary because Love is one.

There is need of only one thing.

The question then remains as to what is the only thing needed. The beginning of the sentence can help us with this: 'Martha, Martha ...' (v. 41). In the repetition of the name, which could almost be seen as a rebuke, in reality is a personal 'vocational call'. It seems, therefore, that Jesus is calling Martha to a new way of relating to him, to weave a bond with him, not as a servant but as a friend who is entering into a profound relationship with him. Chiara Lubich writes: *'Jesus used these circumstances to explain what is most necessary in human life. ... To listen to the Word of Jesus. And for Luke, who writes this passage, listening to the Word also means living it. ... This is what you too must do: welcome the Word and let it bring about a transformation in you. But that is not enough; you should remain faithful to it and hold it in your heart so that it shapes your life, just as the earth holds the seed in its bosom so that it may sprout and bear fruit. Therefore, bear the fruits of new life, the effects of the Word.'*

There is need of only one thing.

Who knows how many opportunities we have to welcome the Master into the intimacy of our home, just like Martha and Mary, and to sit listening at his feet like true disciples? Often our worries, illnesses, commitments and even joys and satisfactions plunge us into a whirlwind of things to do, leaving us no time to stop and recognise the Lord and listen to him.

This Word is a precious opportunity to practise choosing the better part, that is, listening to his Word in order to gain the inner freedom that can enable us to act accordingly in our daily lives. These actions, which are the fruit of a loving relationship will give meaning to our service and our listening.

Letizia Magri