

June Word of Life

‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing’ (Lk 10:41-42).

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How much affection there is in repeating this name: Martha, Martha! The house in Bethany, just by Jerusalem, was a place Jesus would go to stop and rest with his disciples. Outside, in the city, he was involved in discussions; he found antagonism and rejection. Here, instead, was peace and welcome.

Martha was enterprising and active. She showed it later when her brother died and she engaged Jesus in a lengthy conversation, questioning him with energy. She was a strong woman, who showed great faith. When asked, ‘Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?’ she answered without hesitation: ‘Yes, Lord, I believe’ (see Jn 11:25-27).

At this point she was extremely busy sorting out a worthy welcome for the Master and his disciples. She was the mistress of the house (as her name suggests: Martha means ‘mistress’) and so she felt responsible. Probably she was preparing the evening meal for her important guest. Mary, her sister, had left her alone in what she was doing. Contrary to the traditions of the East, Mary did not stay in the kitchen but stuck with the men to listen to Jesus, sitting at his feet, just like the perfect disciple. This gave rise to the rather resentful comment by Martha: ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me’ (Lk 10:40). And Jesus’s affectionate yet at the same time firm reply was:

‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.’

Was Jesus not happy with the enterprise and generous service of Martha? Did he not appreciate her real and practical welcome and would he not have been happy to eat the food that was being prepared? Shortly after this episode, in his parables he was to praise the administrators, business people and employees who knew how to use their talents creatively and do business with their goods (see Lk 12:42; 19:12-26). He even praises shrewdness (see Lk 16:1-8). He could not but rejoice at seeing a woman so full of initiative and capable of giving a warm and abundant welcome.

What he criticizes is the state of bother and worry that goes into the work. Martha is agitated, ‘distracted by her many tasks’ (Lk 10:40); she has lost her calm. It is no longer she who controls her work, but it is her work that has taken control and tyrannizes her. She is no longer free, but she has become a slave to what she does.

Does it not happen also to us at times that we get lost in the thousands of things to do? We are

drawn to and distracted by the internet, by messaging, by useless texts. Even when we have serious commitments to occupy us, they can make us forget to be attentive to others, to listen to people round about us. Above all the danger is that we lose sight of why and who we are working for. Our work and the other concerns become an end in themselves.

Or else we are taken by anxiety and agitation in front of situations and difficult problems to do with our family, money matters, career, school, the future of our children, to such an extent that we forget the words of Jesus: 'Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things' (Mt 6:31-31). We too deserve Jesus's criticism:

'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.'

What is the only thing needed? To hear and live the words of Jesus. Before them, and before he who speaks these words, we cannot put anything at all. The true way of welcoming the Lord, of making him feel at home, is to welcome what he says. Just as Mary did: forgetting everything, she put herself at his feet and did not miss a single word. We will not be guided by our desire to be noticed or to have the first place, but by pleasing him, by being at the service of his kingdom.

Like Martha, we too are called to do 'many things' for the good of others. Jesus has taught us that the Father is happy when we bear 'much fruit' (see John 15:8) and that we will even do greater things than he (see Jn 14:12). He looks therefore for our dedication, our passion in doing the work he has given us to do, our imagination, courage and resourcefulness. Yet without our getting bothered and agitated, but keeping that peace which comes from knowing that we are doing God's will.

The only thing that matters is therefore to become Jesus's disciples, letting him live in us, being attentive to what he suggests, to his gentle voice that prompts us moment by moment. In this way it will be he who guides us in every act.

In doing 'many things' we will not be distracted and side-tracked because, following Jesus's words, we will be moved by love alone. In all we do, we will always do only one thing: love.

Fabio Ciardi