

May 25, 2003

The Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Mary of Bethany is identified by name in only two of the gospels, Luke (10:38-42) and John (11:128-32; 12:1-8). In both places she is described through a studied contrast with some other character.

In Luke's story Mary is contrasted with her (probably older) sister Martha, the latter being described as "distracted with much serving" and "worried and troubled about many things."

One of the reasons Martha was so busy-or at least Martha thought so-was that Mary was not helping her in the kitchen and at table. So she approached Jesus with the request, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And just what was Mary doing that Martha found so inadequate? Well, she "sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word." It seems evident that Martha took her sister's more quiet activity to be either a sign of, or an excuse for, laziness.

By way of response, Jesus corrected, not Mary, but Martha. He even pointed to the superiority of Mary's peaceful occupation, claiming that she "has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Without getting too technical on the point here, it is important that the adjective (\*agathe\*) in this story be translated, not simply as "good" (as in the KJV and other English translations), but as "better" (following the Vulgate). As manifest in many examples in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, the use of a simple adjective to convey a comparative sense, or even as a superlative, is often found in Koine Greek, when two or more things are, in context, being compared. (Thus, for instance, it would have been "better," not simply "good," if Judas had not been born, in Matthew 26:24.)

According to Jesus, then, what Mary was doing was not only good; it was better than what Martha was doing. Consequently, it is no wonder that this verse from Luke has ever been used in the Church to contend for the superiority of contemplation over other kinds of activity. Moreover, along with Paul's thesis on the preference of consecrated celibacy to marriage (1 Corinthians 7:25-40), this text has always served to argue

for the objective excellence of monasticism over other settings of the Christian life. These inferences from the texts in question are both sound and reasonable.

Better to understand, however, how Mary of Bethany represents a Christian contemplative life, it would be useful to consider her activity-sitting and listening to Jesus' word-within the context of Luke's larger story. First, this description suggests a comparison with the activity of Jesus' own mother, who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19,51). Second, both women are portrayed as the true contemplatives described in the parable of the sower. Recall that in Luke's version of that parable the seeds "that fell on good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good (\*agathe\*) heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (8:15). That is to say, Christian contemplation involves the hearing of God's word in purity of heart. Third, this theme is indicated in Luke's distinctive version of another word of Jesus: "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). Fourth, even when a woman in the crowd cried out to bless the mother of Jesus, the Lord responded by pointing to His mother's true blessedness: "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (11:27-28). Mary of Bethany, then, sitting at Jesus' feet to hear His word, exemplifies a theme deep in Luke's interest.

In the Gospel according to John, Mary of Bethany is contrasted with Judas Iscariot. It was Mary who, just six days before the Passover, "took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair" (12:3). That ointment was valued at three hundred pieces of silver by Judas, the thieving apostolic book keeper, who would soon betray Jesus for one tenth of that amount. We who know, trust, and love Jesus as God's Son and our Savior are shocked by the crass response of Judas, which proved that he was already on the side of Jesus' enemies. How could anything done for the love of Jesus be thought extravagant or overly generous? This is obvious to us. It was obvious to Mary of Bethany, as well. She had learned it by sitting quietly at Jesus' feet and listening to His word.

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