

## MONDAY

### THE VERY DIFFERENT SISTERS

*Luke 10:38-42*

Sometimes children seem to weave their personalities and interests into the spaces left by their siblings. One sister plays sports, while the other likes music; one brother likes mathematics, while the other prefers to read, and so on.

It isn't always like that, of course. But it seems that is how it was in one particular household in the village of Bethany – the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Jesus loved their family and was clearly loved by them. The fact that the sisters were very different could not have escaped his notice. Luke gives us a hint. For some reason (perhaps the wording of John 11:1) I always say “Mary and Martha” – in that order. But Luke hints that when Jesus arrived on this occasion, he entered Martha's domain. It was she who “welcomed him into her house” (10:38) – she ran domestic affairs!

It is a familiar situation. When you enter a house, you can usually tell who runs the home and makes family

life work. And you have almost certainly met Martha under some other name. There she is, straining to get everything done. But sometimes she puts so much pressure on herself to get things right that she's on the verge of breaking.

On this occasion, Martha broke big time. Can you see her here? She stands right in front of Jesus ("she went up to him", v 40). She towers over her sister, who is seated at his feet listening to him. There she is, body rigid, arms like pokers at her side, fists tightly clenched, voice higher-pitched than usual. Then comes the explosion. It is a double complaint: one about Jesus ("Lord, do you not care?") and the other about Mary ("My sister has left me to serve alone" – was she too uptight even to use her name?). And to make matters worse, she tells the Lord exactly what he ought to do about it ("Tell her then to help me")!

It's embarrassing. More than that, it is so unspiritual, isn't it? After all, "Mary has chosen the good portion" (v 42). But Martha is angry with her sister; and she is angry with Jesus too.

The disciples had once reacted in the same way and had even asked the same question ("Do you not care?" Mark 4:38). But they thought they were in danger of drowning! This was only domestic overload. It must have been embarrassing – were the disciples wondering where to look?

Notice how Jesus responds. Like a calm spiritual physician, he traces these symptoms in Martha's reaction back to the root of the problem. But he also responds like a father. There's a lot of emotional concern in the way he repeats her name: "Martha, Martha" (v 41). And there is something inexpressibly gentle about the way he puts his finger on the source of this painful inflammation. He doesn't give her a lecture about losing her temper, or even for that matter about not yielding to God's providence, or about the importance of better organisation and delegating responsibilities.

These may all have their place, but they are not the root of the problem. No, the Lord's diagnosis is simpler: Martha has been "anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary" (v 41-42).

Did Jesus simply mean that a sandwich would have been fine with him, and then Martha could have sat down beside her sister and talked to him?

That was true. But there's more to it than that. Jesus wants to deal with the way Martha has been distracted by "many things". The result was that she had lost her focus on Jesus himself. These things were vehicles for serving him. But in the process of Martha's serving, Jesus himself had been obscured. She had lost sight of the Saviour in the service. Doing things for him had taken the place of

