

## OPPOSITES

From the descriptions of her in the biblical text, Martha often seems preoccupied with the etiquette of hospitality, with her sister, Mary seeming quite the opposite, keeping Martha humbled. When Jesus comes to visit, Martha busies herself with tidying up the house and preparing meals. Meanwhile, Mary sits and attentively listens to Jesus' every word. Although Mary may have assisted her sister to some extent, her work didn't seem to be up to Martha's standards. During one particular visit, Martha is particularly busy, preparing food and readying the house for the meal. As she does this, she sees her sister sitting back with Jesus, apparently taking it easy. This frustrates Martha to the point that she begs Jesus to reprimand Mary into helping her. His response is "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." As someone who very readily identifies with Martha, this phrase irks me more than any other in the Bible. However if you think about what Mary was doing: she "sat and listened" to the one who was teaching. This was the usual posture of a disciple of any teacher in the ancient world. But disciples were usually male, so Mary must have been quietly breaking the rule that reserved study for males, not females. Jesus was ignoring the traditional role of women, and encouraging Mary to think and learn. He upheld her right to listen, think about ideas, and to develop her mind. She should not be limited to the tasks that society laid down for her, but be allowed access to

ideas, as Jewish men were. Jesus had previously encouraged the idea of service among his followers, so he did not say that Martha's role of service was unimportant. This would have gone against all his other teaching. What he did say was that being a disciple, and learning about the ideas he was explaining, was even more important.

## SHOW OF FAITH

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Martha made a bold proclamation of faith when she unambiguously affirms to Jesus that "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:27). The only other such dramatic declaration of faith in the Gospels is made by Peter when he states that "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16 and Mark 8:29). Yet here is Martha, a woman, neither an apostle nor a disciple, making a comparable statement of belief.

Mary too makes a profound show of faith when she anoints the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume and oil and then wipes them with her hair (as depicted in Mark's gospel). This demonstration of humility is an expression of love and affection for her Lord. Her actions are also in contrast to the inactions of the male apostles. ■



## Today's readings

1 K 3:5-12  
Rm 8:28-30  
Mt 13:44-52

## GOD'S WORD TODAY

In today's Gospel Jesus tells two parables about treasure to describe what the Kingdom of God is like. The situations in both parables are similar but there are also differences of social status in the two.

The person who discovers buried treasure while he is ploughing a field was probably a landless labourer, employed by the day. By right, the treasure belongs to the owner of the field.

The pearl merchant was probably wealthier than the farm labourer. Buying pearls was part of his daily business but this one is out of the range of anything he has ever seen. It is going to cost him. Like the labourer he has to 'sell everything he owns' to buy it.

The point of these parables is clear. The Kingdom of Heaven is such a treasure that those who discover it are faced with a dilemma: will they pass by or will they make that decision 'to sell all they have'? There is an element of risk, of total investment of self in order to gain the treasure. It is also a moment of radical decision. It is a risk each one of us is being invited to take also.

# SoulSpace

SERIES: WOMEN FROM THE BIBLE

Season colour: GREEN

In this series, Máire Byrne examines key female figures from the Old and New Testaments.



Front cover: "Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha", by David Lindsayley

## MARY & MARTHA — A SHARED FAITH & DEVOTION

Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha is a good friend of Jesus and Jesus often stopped off to see him on his journeys. Mary and Martha came to know Jesus very well during these visits and the four become close friends with Jesus often visiting their home in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. The two sisters, while close, are quite opposite in personality. The one thing that they do share in common however is their faith and devotion to Jesus, which they demonstrate on numerous occasions in the New Testament. Their faith is ultimately rewarded when Jesus raises their brother from the dead.

[continued on back page]

