

Reflection, St Andrews on The Terrace, 21 June 2020

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Luke 10:38-42 John 12:1-11

Mary Oliver: "What I have learned so far"

We are all likely to have experiences of family or friends' stories where each person reminiscing has a different perspective of the same story, and everyone is convinced they are right. Statues have been in the news lately, and that's prompted talk about different versions of history. Shane Te Pou said in a recent newspaper article "It is not enough simply to say they (statues) 'tell our story' when in fact they merely represent a narrow expression of what certain powerful people wanted us to believe at a given point in time."

As an historian, I am acutely aware of perspectives and standing points. We're all together in St Andrews building. I'm standing in front of you looking out at you. We all have different experiences, cultural backgrounds, and families. We bring all this difference to our communications. Some of you will contact me later and maybe take issue with what I say, or agree and express pleasure.

Of course, the same has happened with interpretation of stories in the Bible, with different interpretations at different times in history and different understandings. In our theological training, we were taught to consider psychological, social, political, ethical, and religious dimensions in the text to provide a check on any tendency to generalise. We considered linguistic, historical issues, and understanding of our own situation and life experiences to create a process of understanding - the hermeneutical process, in which German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer described the

meeting of the present with the past as the fusion of horizons. This fusion of horizons should enable us to interpret texts in ways that engage with our present situations.

As you are probably all aware, if we understand that we each have different perspectives we might be more willing to try and understand each other when our opinions differ. We might be less likely to become defensive - or offensive. Curiosity helps - a curiosity that inspires interest in others, the way they think, their history or histories.

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We've seen a lot of confusion and a surge in emotion in Aotearoa New Zealand this week over the story of the two women from the UK who travelled from Auckland to Wellington and then tested positive for Covid-19. There are several versions of the story circulating, lots of accusations of lying or withholding the truth, personal attacks on politicians and public servants. Because we don't know the full story, people interpret it according to their own understandings of the world, including their political inclinations because the issue has become politicised and partisan. We don't know who lied or withheld truth and we may never know. The grief and anxiety over Covid-19 has brought out the best in people, and the worst.

I don't want to talk at length about that, but I didn't feel I could do this reflection without acknowledging it.

Instead, I want to talk about another two women: the sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany, and the way their story has been interpreted over the centuries.

We have just heard the two bible readings in which Martha and Mary figure. They first appear in Luke's gospel, then in John's. Luke's gospel was written around 85 CE in a Greek setting probably for Greek converts, John's gospel was written between about 85 and 110CE in the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem.

The writers and their communities remembered the two women who were close to Jesus, but they saw them from their own perspectives - in their own contexts. We have probably all heard interpretations in which Mary is favoured as the spiritual sister, and Martha is the less valued active sister. The story most interpreted in this way is the Lucan one.

Luke's story is the better known of the two. Martha serves and Mary listens. This story has led to the domestication of Martha and the spiritualisation of Mary - the creation of a binary. Martha was active as she served Jesus while Mary sat at his feet listening. Ancient Greek manuscripts, however, show that many early scribes had difficulty with Jesus's definitive announcement that Mary had chosen the better way: many manuscripts were changed to soften the pronouncement or in some cases it was omitted altogether - evidence that the story itself and the role of women in the early church were contentious from the beginning.¹

The writer of John's gospel presents a different version of the story, in which both Martha and Mary are assertive. They both rebuke Jesus for his tardiness when he arrives days after Lazarus has died. John has Martha proclaim Jesus as the Son of God in a confession that parallels Peter's.² But Peter's

¹ Barbara E. Reid, O.P., *Wisdom's Feast, An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 105-119.

² John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 155,56.

confession is the one used by the church's powerbrokers down the centuries.

Responses to or interpretations of the Martha and Mary stories tell of different understandings in different times. Or even different stories that have been silenced. Roman theologian Hippolytus (c.170-235CE) places both Mary and Martha at the crucifixion - a story that did not make it into the official Christian canon. A contemporary scholar's analysis of early John's gospel texts questions whether Martha might have been added to the gospel in the early part of the second century.³

In 400 of the common era, Augustine of Hippo interpreted Martha and Mary as representing the active and contemplative lives respectively. He asserted the superiority of the contemplative life.

Then, in 1300 mystic and Dominican monk, Meister Eckhart (1260-c.1328) stood this traditional interpretation on its head when he praised Martha as the embodiment of the supreme human ideal as mature, active and creative. He suspected Mary sat by Jesus for pleasure rather than spirituality. He challenged the binary, and emphasised the ineffectiveness of the contemplative in isolation from the active.⁴

As a result of this interpretation and other factors, Martha began to gain respect. A new image of her evolved and a cult developed around her. The Franciscans and others adopted her as a patron saint. Hospitals were named after her and adorned with art depicting her. Artists of the time adorned churches

³ Elisabeth Schrader. "Was Martha of Bethany Added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?" *Harvard Theological Review*, 110: (July 2017): 360-392.

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⁴ June Sturrock. "Martha and Mary Re-Imagined: A.S. Byatt and Others. *Christianity & Literature* 2016, 65(4), 473-489: 482. Downloaded 15 June 2020.

in Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland with images of her. A legend grew that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were expelled from Palestine, put on a raft and sailed to France where they carried out missionary work. An altar built in 1431 in a church in a small village in south west Germany portrays the voyage.

Other medieval images in churches throughout Europe depict Martha defeating the dragon, an action more frequently associated with St George. But in these images, Martha does not kill the dragon as George did. She tames it. A legend in southern France tells of Martha saving the people from a dragon, by sprinkling it with holy water, and binding it with her girdle.⁵ Traditionally the woman has been a victim of the dragon, needing to be rescued by a man. In these legends, Martha turns that tradition on its head.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) came along in the sixteenth century and used his interpretation of Martha to propagate the Protestant concept of faith alone as efficacious in salvation when he preached,

Martha, your work must be chastised and regarded for nothing ... I do not want any work but Mary's and that is faith.⁶

A few years later, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), like Meister Eckhart before her, rejects this dichotomy and celebrates the importance of spirituality and work combined.

More recently; much more recently! In the 1980s, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, professor at Harvard Divinity School, makes a strong case for Martha's table service in Luke as a

⁵ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 43-46.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Festival Sermons*. Trans. Joel R. Baseley. Dearborn, MI: Mark V, 2005 in June Sturrock "Martha and Mary Re-Imagined: A.S. Byatt and Others. *Christianity & Literature* 2016, 65(4), 473-489. Downloaded 15 June 2020.

symbol of Eucharistic ministry.⁷ She suggests Jesus's rebuke to Martha, and the affirmation of Mary's silent compliance, may have been an attempt by the patriarchal church to put women back in their place.

Also in the 1980s, German theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel explored stories of Martha and Mary in her book "The Women Around Jesus." She wrote of the matriarchal Martha traditions and cult that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages, focusing on medieval art representing Martha, including church art and statuary. She notes that the medieval Martha cult with its propensity towards women was forgotten at the end of the Middle Ages: overshadowed by the patriarchal tradition, only to come to light again during the period of intense feminist theological study in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 2001, German theologian Dorothee Sölle emphasised the importance of Meister Eckhart's abolition of the false hierarchy between the so-called spiritual and the worldly. "Real contemplation", she writes "gives rise to just actions; theory and praxis are an indissoluble connection."⁸

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That's an overview of the Martha and Mary stories in broad brushstrokes; and an equally broad view of how stories change according to the time and place of the interpreter, and the assumptions that interpreter brings to a story.

Responses to or interpretations of the Martha and Mary stories over the centuries highlight the importance of taking the time to understand context, to stand back and look at the view from

⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 165.

⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Marion Rumscheidt. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

where we stand. Writing about the process of understanding, Gadamer wrote of a bridge which we must cross to achieve the fusion of horizons necessary for understanding. To cross that bridge, we need an open-mind, curiosity, real interest in the other and in our world, and a willingness to have our worldview challenged.

It also highlights how binaries have been used to subvert, divide and to conquer. Martha and Mary have been used by theologians like Martin Luther to describe opposites, to set up a hierarchy between spirituality or contemplation and action. The good news is that we are not constrained by such opposites. Rather, we are freed to be both. Not just freed, called to action out of our contemplation as Christians. The two belong together: peas in a pod, leaves on a flower, hydrogen and oxygen. As Mary Oliver wrote in the poem Fiona read for us:

Can one be passionate about the just, the
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit
to no labour in its cause? I don't think so.

It's not just enough to be aware of and acknowledge injustice. As followers of Jesus we are called to act where we see injustice.

Amen