



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Genesis 18:1-10a  
Second Reading Colossians 1:21-29  
Gospel Luke 10:38-42

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At one time or another, both Mary and Martha have gotten a bad deal out of today's Gospel story. For many centuries, the prevalence of monks and nuns in the church meant that Mary was held up as the example of the ideal for all women and men. After all, there she was, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his every word- just like those who give up life in the regular world to live in convents and monasteries. And didn't Jesus say about her, "Mary has chosen the *better part*"? So it was, and still is in some societies, that those who lived normal, secular lives out in the world, running businesses, raising families, felt that they were distinctly second-class.

But times have changed. Particularly since the Reformation, our English Christian tradition has reaffirmed the calling to serve God in *all* walks of life, and the call to the cloister- to be a monk or a nun, although it does exist in our Church in some places, is officially considered only *one option* for the Christian, but not necessarily the *best* one for everybody.

Jesus' comment about Mary needs to be carefully considered. And we need to look with equal care at just what is happening in this little domestic "slice of life" that is this episode from the life of Christ.

Look at the facts. If, in fact, Jesus were saying that Mary's choice to sit and listen were the *only* good one, then it seems very unfair. I've dealt with enough women's groups in the churches I've served to know what Martha's response would have been: "Fine, Jesus, then you and your twelve buddies here can darned well *cook your own dinner!*" Yes indeed, somebody has to do housework and tend to the little details of hospitality, and Martha deserves a lot of credit for being the hostess for the Lord and his ample band of disciples.

But the important point about Martha in this story is not *what* she is doing, but *how* she is doing it. We are told specifically that she was *distracted* as she went about her chores. We are also given an insight into the effect of this distraction when she actually seems to lose her temper with Jesus: "Lord, don't you care that my sister is leaving all the work to me?"

Jesus' response to her talks about Mary's good choice, but it is meant to give Martha the chance to make a good choice, too. And that choice will not necessarily be to leave the bread to burn and the table to set itself as she joins her sister in rapt attention to the words of the Master. What Jesus is talking about is *focus*, and doing things with a *purpose* in mind. For Mary, that purpose for the moment involved listening carefully to what Jesus had to say and what she might learn from it. For Martha, there could also be an equally important focus *even as she worked*- even as she did the very "unreligious" duties of keeping her house.

There is indeed a time to be a Mary and a time to be a Martha in everyone's life. Some might say that we are all playing the Mary role here today: sitting here in the presence of the Lord and listening to what he, and not necessarily the preacher!, has to say to us. We are, or should be, focused here, and that is why we have this specialized building and this specialized service to help us concentrate on God. But when we leave here- when we return to the Martha parts of our lives- we must do

what we have to do with no less purpose than we had in church. We can, if we try, stay close to God and indeed *get closer* to God even while we are running our offices, driving our cars, washing our children, meeting our deadlines.

"Martha, Martha," says Jesus today, "you worry and fret about so many things." And he could just as well be talking to us. He is not saying that we should give up our lives, our jobs and our families and go into the monastery. But he is saying that whatever we do needs to have a purpose and a focus in God and his will for us. That is what Mary had; that is what Martha was distracted from.

One of the interesting aspects of the wedding liturgy in Eastern Christian traditions like the Greek and the Russian is the crowning of the bride and groom. The Greeks use flower wreaths and the Russians use real, metal crowns. The symbolism is variously explained. Some say that it is the crown of martyrdom: the dying to self that each spouse must do for the other to make the marriage as success. But others see it as the crowning of a king and queen of the little kingdom that will be their new home. Following on from that is the Eastern Christian teaching that the family forms the basic unit of the Christian community: a "domestic church" in which every chore and duty, and also joy, becomes part of a vocation to be like Christ and to act like Christ.

Your assignment for this week is to consider your own "domestic church," whether it is your home or your office or your special "space." I will suggest that you take some time, even just an hour, to live your life purposefully for God. You don't even have to read a Bible or shut yourself up in prayer: no "Mary stuff" is required, just the "Martha". All you have to do is be conscious of doing what you do to God's glory and his purpose. And when you've finished that hour, look back and see how it felt. It's a first step towards living your life on purpose and not by accident. And that is definitely "*the better part.*"