



The two pictures represent the story of Martha and Mary from two very different social situations. In the painting by Vermeer, a Dutch master of the 17th century, we see an essentially European scene whilst the African setting of the Jesus Mafa painting depicts village life in an unspecified area of Africa.

In Vermeer's painting, Martha is busy putting out the bread and preparing the table, anxiously trying to catch just a few words from Jesus, whilst Mary sits at his feet transfixed and oblivious to the panic of her sister. In both pictures, note that Jesus sits on a chair with a back whilst Martha sits on an uncomfortable stool. The more comfortable chair represents the esteem in which the teacher is held.

In the African scene, Martha is pounding something in the pot, probably Cassava or corn, and she too looks over her shoulder, trying to catch a few words of Jesus whilst Mary is totally absorbed in his words, and making no effort to help.

Different though pictures may be, the theme from Luke's gospel is immediately and clearly visible in both of them. There is a man who is talking. There is a woman who is listening and a woman who is working. The scene described is 2000 years old, from 1st century Palestine, but whether in 17th century Holland or Africa or even in Greenford today, we all understand the tricky situation. We have all been there, in some situation or another.

What the story, and the illustrations, express is the sense of outrage felt by Martha at being left to do all the work whilst her sister just sits and listen to the teaching of Jesus, engrossed in his every word and totally oblivious of the work to be done.

But what is the work? The work is the essential work of hospitality, preparing food for the meal soon to be enjoyed. It is work that must be done, and it has to be done by somebody, or the guest will not be treated to a meal worthy of his status as teacher and leader.

Both the women have a dilemma. Both take their decision. Martha sees the urgency of the coming meal as more important than listening. Mary sees the meal as secondary. They may have Jesus with them only once, so forget the meal and listen!

So, Martha appeals to Jesus, and his sense of fairness. She appeals to him saying, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." Note that she doesn't speak directly to Mary, but goes behind her back. The words "Don't you care?" are rather grating, challenging Jesus to interfere and demanding from him a decision which will change the situation which Martha feels powerless to deal with.

What we are dealing with here is self-esteem.

Self-esteem is one of the key factors in personal happiness. Mary has the self-esteem to realise the importance of the occasion so she opts out of the work and sits at the feet of the teacher. Martha feels the need to please others first before addressing her own deeper needs to listen and learn. Her appeal to Jesus to ask Mary for help is another sign of her lack of self-esteem and insufficient confidence.

But can we bring this story into our own lives and take something away when we leave church later this morning?

Where are you likely to see the reality of the Mary and Martha story today? My guess is that you will see it in your own relationships at home. You will feel the same feelings as Mary and Martha as you struggle to juggle the responsibilities of child-care, cleaning, cooking, personal development, financial clarity and the need for entertainment, all demanding time and space in your busy lives. As we feel the demands of life, children, husbands, wives and all the other pressures, let us remember who had the better part, who had the self-esteem to know how to prioritise, but not in a selfish way, but in a way which recognised and addressed the deepest and essential human needs which we all share, for salvation.