

Martha's Faith

HN/SS 18/09/05 am

Reading: Luke 10:25f, II Timothy 1

Study Text: John 11:17-27

Sing Psalms: 121, 37:1-6, 37:7-11, 123

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me (14:1). Jesus called his disciples to go back to Judea with him because *our friend Lazarus sleeps but I go that I may wake him up* (11:11). What he meant and then said was that Lazarus was dead. The disciples did not understand the mission that Jesus was embarking on, even when he told them he was going *that you may believe* (11:15). His stated purpose in going was that they might believe in Jesus.

In the passage before us today Jesus asked Martha – *do you believe this?* (11:26). Then later at the tomb he lifted up his voice in prayer to God so that the people around might *believe that you* (God the Father) *sent me* (11:42). Jesus performed this mighty work, and indeed worked all the miracles, not that people would be filled with wonder and awe, or that they would simply marvel at him but that they might believe in him.

And this gospel was written by John that you who read it might *believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name* (20:31). Martha responded to Jesus' question with the good confession – *you are the Christ the Son of God*. Peter had made the good confession (6:69), as did Nathaniel and John the Baptist before him. Have you made the good confession – I believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God?

Martha, Martha

Jesus arrived at the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. His disciples were concerned about safety but with this change of scene the focus turns from them to Martha. She was with the mourners in the house when she got news that Jesus was near. Many Jews had gathered around the sisters to join them in mourning. It sounds like they were a prominent family in the village and that some of the Jews had come down from Jerusalem.

Martha hurried from the house when she heard the news – as we might have expected. This was the same Martha who rushed about serving Jesus when he visited previously. Actually she got distracted with all the running around – distracted from the more important things of life. Her sister Mary sat to listen and learn from Jesus. Martha complained to Jesus but he gently rebuked her – *Martha, Martha you are worried and troubled about many things, but one thing is needed* (Luke 10:41).

Martha was more focused on the important things in life this time – or was she? She was not just worried about being hospitable to Jesus – she had some important matters to talk about. But still her focus was upon the here and now, the death of her brother Lazarus – at least initially.

We need to learn from Martha, from her previous encounter with Jesus as well as this one. On the previous visit Jesus helped Martha to get her priorities right. And so we must ask if we have our priorities in life right. Too many people spend all their time and money on feeding and clothing their

bodies while neglecting to feed their souls. We must not get distracted from the important issues in life by the pressing needs of the moment. One thing is needed said Jesus. Put first things first. Spend time listening to Jesus, spend time reading the word of God and he will take care of the other things in your life.

Looking Back

Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died (11:21). Since sending the message to Jesus, Martha and Mary must have raced to their front door at every knock hoping to see Jesus. They knew, they believed, that Jesus had the power to heal sick people and Lazarus was sick. They must have kept saying to each other ‘if only Jesus was here, he would heal our brother’. In their grief after he died they said ‘if only Jesus had been here he would not have died’ – note how Mary said the same thing to Jesus when she came to him (11:32).

How are we to understand Martha’s words? She was of course grieving at this time. Was she upset that Jesus had not come earlier? Did she know he could have come two days earlier – but Lazarus would still have been dead? She was of course very disappointed that Jesus had not come earlier but does not blame Jesus in any way for not doing so. There is no resentment or reproach in her words.

Yet Martha was looking back wishing that things had been different and that Jesus had been able to come on time and heal her brother. If only, *if you had been here* she said. This is what we all do when grief and suffering come our way. We say ‘if only I had done this or that I would not be in this predicament’. Maybe we blame others for our troubles, or start to question God’s love for us. Even the faithful can say ‘if only the Lord had done this or if only the Lord had heard and answered my prayer I would not be suffering as I am now’. We can know the power of God to help us, yet be disappointed and left wondering when he does not help us immediately.

Remembering the past and learning from it is fine, but dwelling on the past stunts our growth as believers. Beware the ‘if only’ syndrome. Whatever has happened to you the Lord has allowed. He may be testing your faith, wanting you to believe in Jesus with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, all your family, all your friends, all your money, all your time, all your everything! Your faith is very precious. And like something precious it must be tested to see if it is genuine.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is refined by fire, may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:6,7).

Looking to God

But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you (11:22). Martha did not dwell on the past but she looked to the Lord. Her brother had died and she was grieving but still she could look to God and look to the future without despairing. In this time of trial she looked to God and clung to his promises. She clung to the truths she had learnt from Jesus and from the Scriptures.

Her forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, did not have easy lives. They suffered many trials and tests of their faith. Many a time Abraham said ‘if only I had a son everything would be fine’. His wife had a son only after it became humanly impossible. They lived in tents in strange lands. They all

probably said ‘if only I had my own land, if only I could settle and bring up my family’. But they knew, they knew that God had something better for them. They looked forward to the heavenly country, to the city whose builder and maker is God.

The apostle Paul, though in prison, chained as a criminal, could say *but I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able* (II Timothy 1:12). Persuaded that he is able! This is the same thinking that we find here with Martha. She believed that for God nothing was impossible. Whatever Jesus asked God would give it. So in her very next breath she turned from looking to the past to looking to God. She looked to the almighty God, the God who can do all things, the God who loved her. Standing before Jesus she did not doubt the love of God. *Lord behold he whom you love is sick* she had said.

When you are in the midst of trouble, of trials and tribulation, remember to look to the Lord. Be assured that he loves you and has not left you. Be assured that with God nothing is impossible. *I will lift my eyes to the hills* says the Psalmist (Psalm 121). He lifted his eyes; he did not look down or look back. He looked to the Lord the maker of heaven and earth.

Martha’s Faith

What did Martha hope for as she spoke these words to Jesus? Her brother was dead. He had been in the tomb four days. Yet she said ‘I know whatever you ask of God he will give you’. What might Jesus ask for on her behalf? Whatever it was Jesus words directed her thoughts towards the resurrection.

Speaking to Martha Jesus said *your brother will rise again*. Death is not the end for your brother (or anyone else). He will rise again. What did Jesus mean? Martha as a Jewess believed in the resurrection of the dead at the last day – and this is how she understood the words of Jesus. She found comfort in this truth although it did not take away her grief entirely. But was there something more specific in Jesus words?

Whatever you ask of God said Martha. What was she thinking? Some say that Martha’s faith was such as to believe that if Jesus asked God he would bring her brother back – but this is not quite what the text says. Besides, she was horrified when Jesus called for the tomb to be opened (11:39). ‘Martha desperately hopes against hope that somehow all will be right, though she knows not how’.

That you (the disciples) may believe that Martha’s faith might be strengthened – this is why Jesus had come to wake Lazarus up. Martha made the good confession; she believed Jesus was the Son of God. But she was to learn more of the unfathomable depths of Jesus love and his power – his power to do far beyond what we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

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