

Saint Martha of Bethany

Small stuff. Bethany. It's a small village, and not posh: think of Hathern. Saint Martha of Bethany, might be - to some - a very minor character in the gospel, a small person. In her friendship with Jesus, the 'greatness of the small' is made visible. Jesus loved her, and her sister – they are the only women in the Bible of whom this is said specifically (John 11:5).

Woman's work? Martha ran a household for her sister and brother, a home open to Jesus and his followers: no small task. It was like a home-base for him just outside of Jerusalem, a place where he was relaxed and welcome. He might turn up anytime with a dozen hungry friends. Martha made them welcome. I think she fed a lot of people. In the Gospels of Saint Luke and Saint John she engages with Jesus in profound and challenging ways. She asks questions, shares emotions and tears, hopes for help, serves generously. She works tirelessly for the Kingdom to come, talking theology – and practicality.

Jesus stayed at Martha's during that last week before he was crucified. I guess Martha made the last bed Jesus slept in before he died.

Faithful sister and public witness. Martha is the first follower of Jesus to name him as '*the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God*' in public (John 11:27). In an earlier private conversation, Peter did the same, but it's Martha who speaks out these holy truths of Christian faith and vision in public. Her conversations with Jesus are strikingly theological, and her questions and concerns are met seriously in Jesus' replies. He asks, after the tragic death of her brother, about her beliefs: "*I know that he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day*" she proclaims, full of faith. But she is also full of grief.

The friend who Jesus cried with. John 11:35 is a famous verse, the shortest in the Bible: 'Jesus wept'. His tears have forever been taken as a sign of his humanity, crying with his grieving friend Martha for her dead brother. The tears are also for the whole human race, who face death, and for his own death, so soon to follow.

Witness to an amazing miracle. Lots of Bibles give a sub-heading to the story of John 11: 'The Raising of Lazarus.' Of course, it's the central miracle of the chapter. Jesus brings his dead friend Lazarus back to life, a sign that he is nothing less than 'the resurrection and the life' in his own person. But only

7 verses occur at the grave. Most of what leads up to this astonishing miracle is: Jesus and Martha talking. Her practicality and faith shine: '*the body is four days dead. There will be a smell*' she warns Jesus. Then she saw the glory of God in the miracle of restored life for herself.

Martha and Mary: service and learning. In a famous exchange, Martha asks Jesus to rebuke her sister for her failure to help with food, cooking and serving as she makes an open house for Jesus and his followers. But Jesus commends Mary as a listener to his teaching. Christians have read this part of Martha's narrative in so many ways over the centuries – but feminist readings today draw attention to Luke's description of Martha as 'deacon' (Greek: 'diakonos') – responsible for fair management, leading in her community, not 'just' serving tables.

Her dialogue with Jesus is a subtle reflection on Jesus' affirmation of women as his disciples. Read it again in Luke 10:38-42. It's so interesting that Mary is silent: it is always Martha who – like a Rabbi's disciple – questions, discusses and engages with Jesus' ideas. Perhaps she is the saint of theological conversation as well as service, and a laden table.

Contemporary reflection. Servant of God Dorothy Day (1897-1980) founded the Catholic Worker's Movement in the USA. She says: "If everyone were holy and handsome, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. But it was not Christ's way for himself. Ask honestly what you would do when a beggar asked at your house for food. Would you give it on an old cracked plate, thinking that was good enough? Do you think that Martha and Mary thought that the old and chipped dish was good enough for their guest? It is not a duty to help Christ - it is a privilege."

The Saint's way of service is open to everyone. The discipleship that asks questions and talks to Jesus about what really matters and serves hungry people generously is for anyone.

We are all saints.