



Christian Art

Daily Gospel Reading and Art Reflection

Luke 10: 38-42

Martha works and Mary listens



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,
Painted by **Diego Velázquez (1599-1660),**
Oil on canvas,
Painted in 1618
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Daily Gospel Reading

Luke 10: 38-42

Jesus came to a village, and a woman named **Martha** welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called **Mary**, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking. Now **Martha** who was distracted with all the serving said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered: '**Martha, Martha,**' he said 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her.'

Reflection on the Painting

Immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan we looked at yesterday, Luke shares this story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary. We are told that Mary rather chose listening to the teachings of Jesus, over helping her sister prepare food. In this painting by Velazquez, we see Mary sitting at Christ's feet listening to Jesus' teaching. Christ is shown as a bearded man in a blue tunic. He points His fingers at Martha, the woman standing behind Mary, rebuking her for her frustration.

Martha, on the other hand, painted as the main protagonist in this story, firmly put in the foreground, is seen preparing food in the kitchen. Her cheeks are red, her look is rather saddened and her wrinkled puffy cheeks, all show that she is upset and frustrated. Martha, so depicted twice (one in the background, once as the maid in the foreground) cannot bring herself to look directly at the biblical scene behind her in her house. She looks instead directly at us, almost meditating on the implications of the story, which for a Christian-alert contemporary audience at the time would have conveyed the message that the traditional superiority of the *vita contemplativa* (spiritual life) was more important than the *vita activa* (temporal life), not that the latter was inessential of course... Her looking directly at us, invites us straight into the story.

Martha is pounding garlic in a mortar, and other ingredients lie scattered on the table: fish, eggs, a shrivelled red pepper and an earthenware jug probably containing olive oil. The older woman on the left has led to much speculation as to who she might be. She is pointing and as such maybe giving instructions to Martha as to how to cook or maybe even telling her off for being distracted and prompting her not be upset with Mary. Who knows?

Ok and now for you readers who enjoy cooking!... The ingredients in front of Martha are to prepare a meal for Lent, a meatless one: fish, two eggs, garlic, peppers, a jug of oil. Scholars found a 17th-century Spanish cookbook that seems to show the very dish Martha is cooking: fish fried in olive oil, with sautéed onions, peppers and pimiento, topped with eggs. Food historians think that the garlic being crushed in the mortar is to make aioli... Writing today's entry has made me rather hungry now!