

As in a Film: A Place Where Jesus Can Rest

Bethany was a special place for Jesus. There he could rest and feel at home, and talk quietly with his friends in an atmosphere of affection.

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Every film has some scenes that allow viewers to pause for a moment and rest. They give us time to understand the plot better, to enjoy the performance of the actors and

the soundtrack, to admire the visual settings. These scenes may not be as important as other parts in the development of the story, but they help us to enjoy the film even more.

Something similar happens with certain scenes in the Gospel. Jesus isn't always seen addressing crowds or working great miracles.

Sometimes the Evangelists pause to show us how He rested with the Apostles or in one of his favorite places, the village of Bethany. There he could rest and recover his strength because He felt truly loved, and didn't have to face those who were always trying to twist his words. "We enter that house in Bethany, a resting place always open to Jesus. There our Lord has a home, as I have so often told you; a home like the one He should find in our hearts, in our centers, in our tabernacles, because we treat Him well, and we will strive to wait for

Him and love Him more each day. Bethany moves me; it has always moved me.”[1]

An attack of nerves

The Gospels tell us that this small village had the privilege of witnessing one of our Lord’s greatest miracles: the resurrection of his friend Lazarus, four days after his death. It is also where Jesus was received six days before his Passion, when he stayed in the house of Simon the leper. And very close to Bethany is the place where Christ ascended into heaven.

Saint Luke recounts for us one of those stops of our Lord in Bethany, with the normality that marks an encounter among friends (cf. *Lk 10:38-42*). Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, but with only two miles to go he decided to stop along the way. “He entered a village; and a woman

named Martha received him into her house.”

It is easy to imagine Martha’s emotion when Jesus accepted her invitation. But her joy would also have been accompanied by a certain anxiety. She wanted the Master’s stay to be as pleasant as possible, so she quickly started preparing everything as well as she could. After Jesus and his companions greeted Mary and Lazarus, they quickly found themselves at home.

Soon Jesus begins to speak. We don’t know the topic of the conversation, but we do know that Martha’s sister Mary was sitting at his feet, listening intently to his words. Meanwhile Martha was busy trying to treat our Lord as He deserves. Following the local customs, she wants to give Jesus the best: clean water for his feet, oil to anoint his hair... She wants to make sure the different dishes arrive

when they are warm, and that nothing is missing. It is her way of expressing love for our Lord. But time seems to be running short. She can't get to everything, and there are still so many things she has to prepare. She hurries from place to place, and becomes more and more anxious. Martha, indignant on seeing her sister's passivity, thinks that if her sister were helping her, everything would be much easier

The moment comes when Martha can no longer contain herself and she breaks into the middle of the conversation, addressing the Master directly: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." Martha is a woman with a determined and noble character. She expresses her feelings clearly and forcefully. On another occasion, she will have no qualms about reproaching our Lord for his absence: "Lord, if you had been here,

my brother would not have died" (Jn 11:21). And now she is quick to interrupt our Lord and express her dismay in everyone's presence.

Martha could have disguised her predicament, her unease; she could have discreetly reproached her sister, trying to ensure that no one else noticed. Instead, she decides to address the Master directly and "even feels she has the right to criticize Jesus."^[2] In any case, her request seems a reasonable one. Any one of us would have done the same. Perhaps those present might have found it an unwelcome intrusion, a minor concern when much more important topics were being discussed. But possibly more than one would have wondered what Mary was doing just sitting there without helping her sister.

A reproach filled with affection

Martha's agitated request is answered by Jesus' calm voice: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." The gospel has recorded for us our Lord's kind response. Jesus repeats Martha's name twice, showing the affection he had for her. It is a reproach filled with love, helping her realize something she had overlooked.

Why does Jesus reproach Martha, if her only concern is to serve her guests? "Because she considered what she was doing as the only essential thing," Pope Francis said, "that is, she was too absorbed and worried about the things that needed to be done. In a Christian, works of service and charity are never separated from the main source of each action of ours: that is, listening to the Word of the Lord, being – like

Mary – at the feet of Jesus, with the attitude of the disciple.”[3]

Jesus understood Martha’s problem. That is why He didn’t ask her to change *externally*, to leave everything she had in hand and sit down and listen. The change he asked for was above all *internal*, inviting her to carry out her chores with a different attitude.

The Evangelist’s narrative ends here. But we can imagine how the scene continued. Perhaps Mary, feeling supported by what Jesus had said, would continue to sit at his feet. Martha, in turn, surely continued serving, but with a completely different outlook. She would have carried out her tasks while striving not to miss a single word that came from the Master’s lips. She would have remembered who she had close by and for whom she was working. She had learned the true meaning of

her chores. “The human person must indeed work and be involved in domestic and professional occupations, but first and foremost he or she needs God, who is the inner light of Love and Truth. Without love, even the most important activities lose their value and give no joy. Without a deeper meaning, all our activities are reduced to sterile and unorganized activism. And who but Christ can give us Love and Truth?”[4]

The change of attitude that Jesus asked of Martha – and of each one of us – is only possible through love. It is not simply the effort to put more attention or care into our daily tasks. Rather, it is realizing as we work that God is looking at us with love. Then our work becomes an act of constant love, a continuous “I love you” that goes beyond what we can say with our lips or our thoughts. “Words are not needed, because the tongue

cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”[5]

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[1] Saint Josemaria, Meditation, 22 July 1964.

[2] Benedict XVI, General audience, 18 July 2010.

[3] Pope Francis, General audience, 21 July 2013.

[4] Benedict XVI, General audience, 18 July 2010.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God* , no. 307.

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