

MARTHA

I. Bethany

Bethany is a small village situated on the southeast side of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. No mention is made of this village in the canonical books or in the Apochrypha of the Old Testament. Bethany makes its appearance for the first time, as does the Fourth State Point, in the New Testament. The more recent writers on Biblical history speak of it as a miserable, untidy, and tumble-down village. Actual or impending decay would seem to be written upon its dwellings. Yet, we are filled with reverential awe as we recall the immortal memories of what occurred within and around this little village. In speaking of Bethany Dr. Morrison says:

There are particular times when the name has a particularly soothing music in its sound for the Christian. Whisper to him of Bethany when he sits in his desolate home, and, wandering back through the past, thinks of a face that is vanished, a voice that is mute, and a sacred mound in the churchyard—whisper to him then of Bethany, and his grief is assuaged, as he thinks that Jesus wept there, and his face brightens, and he gets a motto from the Lord's own lips which faith can inscribe on the tombstone, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" Whisper to him of Bethany when he is wearied with his daily toils; when the wrinkles of anxiety come out on his brow; when losses, crosses, and failures have made him peevish and morose; and he can enter the house of Martha and Mary, and sitting down at the feet of Jesus, have all his vexations dissipated, as he hears about the "good part that shall never be taken away."

Here lived Martha, Mary, and Lazarus and Simon the Leper." It was near Bethany that Jesus was last seen by his disciples.

II Martha's Home in Bethany

There is very little authentic information about the early history of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It would seem that they were an orphan family. Their home is said to have been a very beautiful and wealthy home, with even luxuries. Martha was the housekeeper. She looked after the

food, comforts of the family, and the guests. The central figure of the whole story, however, is Jesus, with Martha and Mary standing in the foreground of the life of Jesus. Time and time again we find the Master, amidst the tumults, storms, applauses and successes of public life, taking refuge in some secluded or quiet spot, literally yearning for the privacy and the atmosphere of domestic life and home love. It is not known when Jesus began to make their home his home when in Bethany. Christ on leaving his earthly father's home in Nazareth became a wanderer. He never had a home of his own on earth. One of the most striking and pathetic utterances He ever made regarding himself was in reference to his having no home, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." His loneliness is manifest by his frequent communication with the Father.

The home at Bethany was to Him a home of quiet and rest, where a most cordial and loving welcome was extended with sincere affection. What a beautiful friendship sprang up between Jesus and every member of the Bethany family! The home was one of friendly peace that was not tainted with interested ambition. Furthermore, its members coveted no place of honor. Jesus was at home in this household. With his missions full of perplexing problems of all kinds, how He must have appreciated this retired home, "where friends found love's reward in love's sacrifices, and the joy of living in increased capacity to love." He was there not simply for quietness, to eat, and to sleep, but the friendly and sympathetic surroundings made it refreshing to the soul of Jesus "to hold converse concerning the things of the Kingdom. Such work and fellowship so like to those of Heaven, would also be allied thereto in the rest involved." The atmosphere of the place reminds me very much of the last verse of the song by O'Reilly, entitled, "Down Here":

"Oh, it's quiet down here,
And through the long day
To the great God of Peace
I feel I must pray.
Oh, it's quiet down here,
But God is very near."

III. The First Recorded Visit of Jesus to the Bethany Family

The preaching of Christ was the great religious phenomenon of the times. There are three specific scenes related of the Bethany family, in all of which Jesus is the central figure. The first scene is recorded in the closing verses of the tenth chapter of Luke. Jesus, weary with the dissensions at Jerusalem, came to Bethany for rest, and stopped at the home of Martha and Mary, probably unexpected by them, where He was most cordially received by Martha, the elder sister.

"Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at the Lord's feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving; and she came up to him and said, Lord doest thou not care that my sister did leave me to serve alone? Bid her, therefore, that she help me. But the Lord answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful; for Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

This story upon first reading, seems simple enough, but the reading of even a small part of the literature of Martha and Mary almost bewilders one in the variety of ways in which these two lovely and Christian characters are contrasted. The chief value of the story is perhaps the revelation of the humanity of Jesus. He has taught us how close he was to all human lives and how tender and sympathetic to all human frailties. The divinity of Christ, however, is always to be borne in mind. Speaking in this connection Dr. Potter says of Jesus, "But all the while, there He is, that wonderful Personality in the pages of the Gospel, so divine at one moment, so human at another, that only when the mind grasps and holds fast to the two ideas has it even intellectually apprehended Him." We can all sympathize with kindly Martha in her eagerness and desire to entertain Jesus in the most worthy manner. She wanted everything just

right. She became impatient with Mary because she did not leave Jesus when she called her to help her prepare the meal. Her mind was all absorbed with her particular job that was hers. She became fussed in the preparation of the meal. She got worried and lost her temper. otherwise she would not have complained of Mary in the presence of Jesus in such a fault-finding way. She should have approached her in a quiet way, but she complained to her Guest, Jesus, and sought his interference to secure Mary's help, and thus included Jesus in her reproach. She should have used more gentle words, but that was not in her temperament. Mary, the sweet-tempered, irresponsible, pensive and spiritual Mary, who was sitting at Jesus' feet taking in everything that Jesus said, made no reply. She may have been so interested in what Jesus was saying that she did not hear the call of Martha. Jesus, however, understood Martha, appreciated her worth, and loved her. She undoubtedly deserved the rebuke she received. But what a mildness and majesty in the reproof! We, nevertheless, should be ever ready to show a tender sympathy for the hard worked and over-burdened women, and men as well, all about us. It is to be clearly observed that the Lord did not blame or condemn the work that Martha did, but what He did do was to distinguish between the services they were rendering. Furthermore, He did not blame her for her nature, not for not restraining and governing her own nature and keeping it in subjection to higher considerations, but He pointed out to her that she was unnecessarily burdening herself with a weight of perplexities of which there was no need, and that she found no time to speak of the only and one consideration that endures beyond this world. Martha was intent on how she might feed the Lord, Mary was intent on the sweetness of the Lord's word. She was riveted to her seat by the accent of Him who "spake as never man spake."

IV. Illness, Death, Burial and Resurrection of Lazarus

Jesus during the last illness of Lazarus had escaped beyond the Jordan "into the place where John baptized." Word had been brought to Jesus that Lazarus was seriously ill, with an appealing message from his sisters saying, "Lord, he whom thou loveth is sick." Jesus, however, delayed starting for two days in order to further work out the divine plan of his mission. He became perfectly aware before He started of the death of Lazarus. When Jesus and the disciples reached Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. There are few of us who have not experienced the hours of anguish and distress in the loss of a loved one. After the funeral service of Lazarus, the two sisters, alone in this world, return to their home. Oh, the great sorrow of these lone and tried servants of God! It was a custom of the time to visit the grave of the deceased especially during the first three days.

A rumor reaches them that Jesus and the disciples were drawing near to Bethany. In the scene of sorrow Martha with her natural impulsiveness—strong, unsubdued by emotion, rushes out to meet Jesus, and comes upon Him just outside of Bethany. The burden of her heart and that of Mary finds utterance in the same words, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. And even now I know that, whatsoever thou shalt ask of God, God will give thee." The Lord replied, "Thy brother shall rise again." Martha replies, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." There was no present and real comfort in these words to her. Her brother was dead to her forever as far as this world was concerned. Jesus then uttered that most precious promise and assurance of immortality: He that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believeth thou this?" She said unto him, "Yea, Lord." Her faith was strong

but she could not all at once accept the ultimate proof. There she stands so tenderly in the presence of Jesus and his disciples. It would seem that Jesus called for Mary, whereupon Martha hastened home to deliver the message "secretly."

Mary was sitting at home quietly, but meditatively, surrounded by many Jews who had come to comfort these sisters. After Martha had delivered the message saying, "The Teacher is here, and calleth thee," Mary arose quickly to go to Jesus, followed by the Jews who were with her, supposing they were going to the tomb of Lazarus. When Mary came to where Jesus was, she likewise exclaimed, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. She fell at his feet and was comforted. Not a word more is recorded that she uttered. The entire gathering was in tears. What a tense moment it must have been! "Jesus wept." The friends around Him said, "Behold how He loved him." They repair almost immediately to the closed tomb of Lazarus, which was a cave. Jesus ordered the stone which lay against it removed, after which He lifted up his heart in that wonderful prayer, "Father, I thank thee, that thou hast heard me." Then Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." What a tense moment! One can almost feel that all hearts but stopped beating. Lazarus came forth bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and a napkin about his face. Jesus said unto them, "Loose him and let him go." There he stands before them, the same Lazarus, their own and only brother. One can well imagine the joy too deep for words that filled the hearts of Martha and Mary as they clasp their brother in silent and speechless embrace.

V. The Farewell Supper to Jesus

Jesus arrived at Bethany six days before the Passover; that is on Friday. The day after was the Sabbath. On this day "they made him a supper there and Martha served." Supper was the special meal of the Sabbath. It would seem that it was a public affair and that it took place in the house of "Simon the Leper", as he became known. At any rate it was given by

the Bethany family. Lazarus sits with Jesus at the table. Martha superintends the feast. Mary worshiped Jesus in her characteristic way, by pouring forth the great passionate love of her heart. These closing days of Christ's mission on earth were full of intense interest and premonitions as the time of his ascension drew nigh. Mary owed the Lord what she could not pay. She had sat as a diligent disciple at his feet. He had raised her brother from the tomb. She herself had received eternal life. She felt that she must do something to give expression to her feelings. She, therefore, took a box of pure and costly ointment and poured it upon the feet and head of Jesus "and wiped his feet with her hair." It was a lovely and beautiful thing to do. Judas Iscariot upbraided Mary for wasting, as he said, this ointment which should have been sold and the money given to the poor. The fact is that he wanted to get the money for himself. He is spoken of in this connection as a thief. Other bystanders couldn't understand this seeming waste. Then Jesus said, "Suffer her to keep it against the day of my burying. For the poor ye have always with you; but me ye have not always." How comforting are the words, "She hath done what she could," that is all she could. The comment of Dr. Hastings on this scene is more beautiful and illuminating:

"The great words in which Jesus justified the breaking of the alabaster box on his own behalf embody a principle which should run through all wise life. The words were these, 'The poor ye have always with you; but me ye have not always.' The principle is this--that opportunities differ in value and importance, and that wisdom consists in reading their value aright and in selecting the one which will not be always with us. Certain things may be done at any time; certain others now or never. Every life is confronted at many points with this strange contrast--between the ordinary opportunities which come with every day, and some great opportunity which, if not grasped at once, may vanish forever. The poor and Jesus! There is the living contrast which is symbolical of so much in our life. The presence of the poor we can depend upon; the pathetic commonplace is ever about us; but unique opportunities are not always with us. They are rare. Sometimes they to us but once; and though we should wait for a century, they would never come again."

"For no man knows what the gods may send,
Or the day when the word will come
That shall change the ways of his life, or land
A voice to a soul born dumb.
And never man shall plumb
The depths of a sleeping past."

VI. Martha and Mary

Martha and Mary represent types that are with us today as they have always been. They have had a living power and helpfulness that is unmeasurable. This dramatic power often in a most beautiful and characteristic way creates a vivid and lasting image of a personality that remains with us as long as we live and stamps indelibly in a most lasting way. Both of these charming and estimable women were disciples of Jesus; both of them well pleasing to Him; both of them accepted His teachings; both of them were objects of His love and affection; both praiseworthy; and both believed in his Messiahship.

The lives of Martha and Mary express in a figurative way, the life present and the life to come; the life of labor and activity, and the life of quiet; the life of sorrow and the life of happiness; the life temporal and the life spiritual. What Martha was doing, that we are all doing. What Mary was doing, that we should hope for.

"'Tis joy enough, my All in All,
At Thy dear feet to lie;
Thou wilt not let me lower fall,
And none can higher fly." —Cowper—

The distinctive traits of these sisters has been well summarized by St. Augustine: "The one was busy; the other was still, the one was giving out; the other was being filled." Many other contrasts might be made between these two lovely women. We can but look at them and speak of them in the most complimentary way, each having their strong and weak points. But we must keep in mind that perfection is not of this world. Their lives and services are open to the widest interpretation. Dr. Potter in speaking of any attempt to strike any balance of the virtues or frailness of these two women says: "I love Mary in the fine spiritual quality of her devotion that forgets homelier tasks; but I cannot but remember that if somebody else had not recollected and discharged them, the dear and august Guest might have suffered hunger in the house of his friends."

George Eliot, in Scenes of Clerical Life, puts words into the mouth of one of her characters, that are rather unique: "I've nothing to say again' her piety, my dear; but I know very well I shouldn't like her to cook my victuals. When a man comes in hungry an' tired, piety won't feed him, I reckon. Hard carrots ull lie heavy on his stomach, piety or no piety. I called in one day when she was dishin' up Mr. Tryan's dinner, an' I could see the potatoes was as watery as watery. It's right enough to be speritial—I'm no enemy to that; but I like my potatoes mealy. I don't see anybody 'ull go to heaven the sooner for not digestin' their dinner—providin' they don't die sooner, as mayhap Mr. Tryan will, poor dear man."

Martha is the patron saint of all good housewives, careful mothers, and skillful and efficient nurses of the present generation. Her character makes a strong appeal to energetic women and especially to comfort-loving men.

"Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees!
Who, hopeless, lays his head away,
Nor looks to see the breaking day
Across the mournful marbles play!
Who hath not learned, in hours of faith,
The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
That life is ever lord of Death,
And Love can never lose its own!" --Whittier