

3.9 Martha and Mary

Jesus' visit

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.' ”

Luke 10:38-42

According to John's gospel, Martha and Mary lived in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus and the disciples were travelling towards Jerusalem and perhaps Jesus knew what awaited him there. They stopped at Martha's house, which she shared with her sister Mary. While they are there, Mary behaved in a way that would have been considered inappropriate.

A woman's place

In 1st-century Palestine, the place of women was in the domestic area and with the children. The men would sit in the public area and debate and argue. Mary is described as sitting with the men and listening to Jesus teaching. She is behaving like a man when she should be doing women's work.

Martha is well aware of this. It may be true that the preparation for the meal was a difficult task. Her major concern, however, may have been the awkward social position that Mary has taken.

Jesus is sympathetic but tells Martha not to fuss. Mary has chosen something better – she has chosen to listen to the teaching about the Kingdom of God – and this should not be taken away from her. This can be interpreted to mean that once she has heard the message it will stay with her, whatever happens.

Jesus is shown in Luke as being very concerned for the place of women. Luke sees women as important to the narrative and part of God's creation. Women feature prominently in the life of Jesus and are also used in the parables to illustrate his teaching. Christians can learn from this that women have a full part to play in the church and in society. Jesus was not making a statement about women's rights – he was emphasising God's teaching that all people matter equally.

Objectives

Study the incident of Martha and Mary.

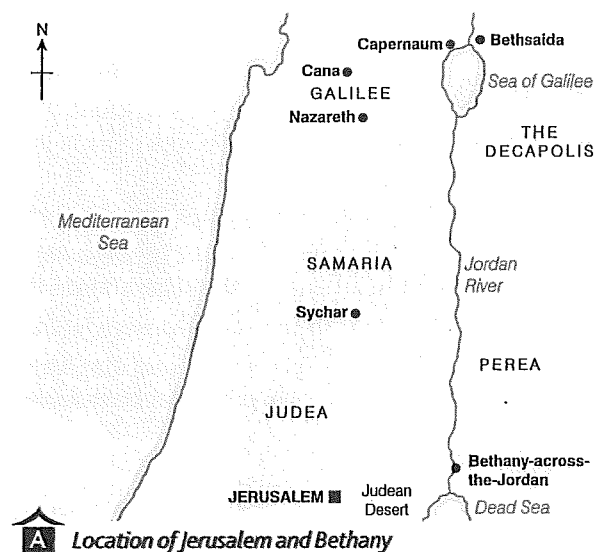
Understand Luke's description of Jesus' treatment of women.

Understand the meaning of 'Lord' as title for Jesus.

Understand the significance of this story for Christians.

Key terms

Lord: this was a messianic title given to Jesus by the early Church after his resurrection. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the title was in common use, so Luke uses it.



Martha and Mary

Some scholars have seen the difference between Mary and Martha as one that shows different styles of belief. Some people are very active (Martha) but others are more thoughtful and contemplative (Mary).

People need to be a bit of both: 'Without the first you wouldn't eat, without the second you would not worship' (T Wright, *Luke for Everyone*).

■ Jesus as Lord

In the passage Jesus is described as 'Lord' twice. In the Old Testament, the word for 'Lord' occurs over 9,000 times and almost always refers to God.

Luke uses the word more often than anyone else in the New Testament. It can be a way of addressing Jesus politely (or anyone else for that matter), but it can also mean that people recognised Jesus as someone God-like.

Later writers in the New Testament refer to Jesus as Lord, indicating that Jesus is the one who rose from the dead.



B Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary

Activities

- 1 Why was Martha upset with Mary?
- 2 What does Jesus' reply teach about his attitude to women?

AQA Examiner's tip

The titles of Jesus are important in understanding Christian beliefs about who Jesus was. Make sure that you learn the ones you have studied and their meaning.

Research activity

- 1 Look up some other references to women in the Gospel of Luke and explain to a partner what you have learned.
- 2 Make notes on the passages that you have studied.
Luke 7:11; Luke 7:32; Luke 8:2; Luke 13:11; Luke 15:8ff; Luke 18:1ff; Luke 21:1-4; Luke 23:27ff

Summary

You should now know an incident when Jesus was called Lord and the significance of this title and understand that Jesus respected women and valued those who made time to consider spiritual issues.