

Martha couldn't multi-task. Like a lot of men – including me. I multi-task up here (head), with a dozen things going on at once, but this very rarely translates into actually doing anything. Even so, I have a great deal of personal sympathy for Martha, because if Martha hadn't prepared the dinner, Jesus and Mary would have gone hungry. Mary chose the better part, yes, but the phrase makes a telling point, because it suggests that listening and serving are not actually mutually exclusive. There isn't actually a choice to be made. You can do both at the same time, Martha doesn't realise that she can do the serving *and* be attentive to the Lord; many centuries later St Benedict was to put it succinctly: *Labore est orare* – 'to work *is* to pray'. The point for which Jesus affectionately chided Martha was that she had become distracted by the chores; there was nothing wrong with getting dinner ready, it was her being distracted by it that Jesus was pointing out.

On the other hand, Mary doesn't realise that she can be attentive to the Lord *and* help with the serving. I remember, when the Italian staff had their day off in seminary and a pipe or a drain needed unblocking, there were always a few students who couldn't lend a hand because they had to go to the chapel to say the rosary for someone's intention. They were regarded by the other seminarians with a deeply affectionate contempt; I'm sure, in any case, that their first week in a parish changed all that. Although one is actually a bishop now – but I shall leave him unnamed.

When Jesus speaks Martha's name, he does so with an infinite tenderness: "Martha, Martha... you worry and fret about so many things...". In the same way, a young man who was living a life that wasn't doing him any good and had ended up in hospital, suddenly sensed a presence in his room one morning... and the sound of his own name – Andrew – twice. He says:

"And this presence, although it had no shape and spoke no words, nevertheless had a tone, a tone that was at admonitory and intimate, firm and solid with a kindness that I could not even allow myself to feel. (...) Although I couldn't hear it, I knew it; and it knew me."

A couple of weeks later, out of hospital and back at home, he was reading through the gospel of John and he came upon this gospel passage. He read it with a deep sense of realisation. He writes:

"'Martha, Martha.' I don't think Jesus ever speaks to anyone else in the gospels in that way. 'Martha, Martha.' He repeats the name twice, exasperated but loving, chiding but intimate. It's one of those many details that convince me of the truth of the gospel, the kind of intimate, intensely personal way of speaking, a detail that would never have been invented by someone trying to bludgeon the reader into some theological lesson, the kind of address that a real person once used for a real person, and a real person whom he had loved, as much *for* her faults as in spite of them. 'Martha, Martha.'

‘Andrew, Andrew.’ It is not simply the tone of love; it is the tone of friendship, an unmistakable tone that I did not only recognise but suddenly, heartbreakingly, knew.”

Marth and Mary are one person – the human person, you and me – and that same voice speaks to each one of us in the same tone of loving friendship. Because both Martha and Mary are within us, we can listen to his voice in quiet times and in busy, when we are still and when we are active. We can listen to him while doing the chores and we can do the chores while listening to him. There is no choice to be made.