

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 19th July 2015
by Revd John Mills**

You may remember following the dreadful massacre in Paris that “Je suis Charlie” was a phrase appearing everywhere in the media, in print, on TV and across the internet and social media in particular. I couldn’t get behind it although I understood the sentiment. I couldn’t identify with a magazine that went out of its way to offend. I wasn’t Charlie. However, I have a confession to make tonight, “Je suis Martha” - and it may be a confession some of you identify with.

In explaining why let’s look at this well-known story from scripture. It’s one of those stories I’d love to know the back story to. Luke simply tells us that “as Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened up her home to him”. There’s surely more behind it. There’s no mention of Lazarus, Martha and Mary’s brother. Why not? Perhaps as some have suggested Lazarus was one of Jesus’s close friends and may have been travelling with him. So perhaps Martha was left in charge and was opening the house to her brother and his friends. Certainly in that culture it would provoke suspicion at least for two unmarried women to open up their house to a travelling bunch of entirely strange men. I suspect at least a degree of forward planning here, not on a whim. Not least Martha doesn’t strike me as the spontaneous type of person. – Je suis Martha. The way Martha addresses Jesus later also suggests they had met before.

Then there’s Mary. Why is Martha so angry with her? Is it because she is acting out of character, she could normally be relied on to help? Or is it because she had form like this? If so, you can imagine the conversation beforehand Martha saying “Now Mary, I really do need your help this time with all these people coming” and what has she done instead? Or is it that she is concerned that Mary is acting outside propriety by sitting at the feet of a male teacher? Martha someone prone to be more concerned with appearances than spiritual encounter? – Je suis Martha.

Then Martha’s reaction, to try and get someone to back you up when you feel you’ve been wronged or when you’re convinced someone else is in the wrong. She’s almost using Jesus like one of those intermediators in family sit coms when the principals aren’t talking to each other “Tell your Father his dinner’s in the cat” Sometimes at least – Je suis Martha.

In the NIV and the NRSV the word that is used about Martha is that she was distracted, distracted by all her preparations. Distracted from being able to be with Jesus. How many of us can say “Je suis Martha to that one? I’m certainly adept at being distracted from quiet time alone with the Lord. Perhaps we could categorise them as the distractions of service and the purely distractions. Martha at least is distracted by

service. This is her chance to serve the Lord and it's good and it's right and so is our service, but not then not at that moment. Here was a chance to spend time with the Lord away from the crowds and she passes it up. A wise woman seeing the kind of person I am told me "Remember we were human beings before we were human doings"!! Then of course there are the pure distractions, the TV, the gardening, Facebook – whatever it is. Again not bad in themselves but distraction from spending time with the Lord when we haven't makes them the distraction that they are.

Jesus says "Martha, Martha" – perhaps in deliberate contrast to Martha's impersonal accusation against "my sister". "Mary has chosen what is better" he says. What is better? To be with the Lord. For us to be with him in prayer and in prayerful living to have that mindfulness that he journeys with us throughout our days, that he is beside us, above us, before us, behind us. Just as Mary may have defied convention by sitting at the feet of a rabbi to be with him, to learn from him so might we defy the conventions of the world that says all there is is the here and now, the physical – live for yourself in the moment. In such close relationship with the Lord we find the inspiration for service and evangelism. As Martha rightly knew there is much to be done in this troubled world, the lost and the lonely are still there but as Mary knew it is the time spent with the Lord that recharges us. So, in choosing the better way of closer relationship with the Lord we can say with the psalmist "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds".