

MARTHA AND MARY

ST AELRED OF RIEVAULX¹

IN one of the castles Jesus entered during his journey, a woman called Martha entertained him in her house. She had a sister called Mary. You have heard from the gospel the great happiness of the two women. Truly, great happiness was Martha's who received such a guest, who waited upon him and was busy in his service. Great happiness was Mary's who recognised the excellence of her guest, who heard his words and tasted his sweetness. The gospel narrates that our Lord Jesus Christ entered one of the castles and a woman called Martha entertained him in her house. She had a sister called Mary who ran to Jesus when he entered and sat down at his feet listening to his words. So closely did she attend to the words of the Lord that she took no heed of anything in the house, not even how much her sister was labouring. Which one of us, if our Lord were on earth and wished to come to us, would not greatly rejoice? Should we despair of his coming just because he is not bodily on earth and we cannot receive him in human form? Let us prepare our houses and he will come to us at our work in a better way than if he came bodily. These women surely were blessed who received him corporally but more blessed are they who receive him in their hearts. At that time there were many who received him, ate and drank with him, but because they did not receive him into their hearts they remained miserable. Who was unhappier than Judas? And he served the Lord in human form. I shall say even more. The blessed Virgin Mary herself whose glorious assumption we celebrate today certainly was blessed because she received the Son of God in her body. But she was even more blessed because she received him into her heart.

Yesterday we read how a woman said to our Lord: Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the breast which thou hast

¹ Translated by Sister Rose de Lima, of Seton Hill College, Pennsylvania, from the sermons in Migne P.L. 95, cols. 303-9. The Latin department of Seton Mill College is projecting the English translation of the works of St Aelred.

sucked. And he answered, Shall we not say, Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it? Therefore, let us prepare a spiritual castle that our Lord may come to us. I speak boldly, for unless the blessed Mary had prepared this castle in herself the Lord Jesus would not have entered her womb or her heart and this gospel would not be read on this feast today.² Let us fortify this castle, then, with three things: a moat, a wall, and a tower. First a moat, afterwards a wall beside it, and then a tower, the most important of the three. The wall and moat protect each other; for unless a moat is present men may approach and undermine the wall, and if the wall is not there they may fill the moat. The tower guards everything because it is higher than anything else.

Let us now enter our soul and see how these things should be accomplished spiritually in us. What is the moat unless deep earth? Therefore, let us dig our heart where the earth is deepest. Let us carry away the earth within, which is our human frailty, and cast it up to make a moat. Let us not hide it within, but let it be always before our eyes as a moat of deep earth in our hearts. That moat is humility. Let us recall what the vinedresser in the gospel said concerning the tree which the lord of the vineyard wished to be cut down: Sir, let it be this year too, so that I may have time to dig and put dung round it. He wished to dig a ditch, that is, to teach humility. So let us begin to build this castle. For unless there is first a moat in our heart, that is, true humility, we shall build nothing, but heap ruins upon our own head. How well the blessed Mary made this moat for herself! Surely she considered more her own frailty than all her dignity and holiness. She knew that of herself she was frail; and that only by the grace of God was she holy, was she the Mother of God, the mistress of angels, the temple of the Holy Spirit. She humbly confessed what she was of herself: Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to thy word. And again: He has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid.

After a moat we ought to make a wall. That spiritual wall is chastity—a strong wall, which keeps the flesh clean and

² The new Mass of the Assumption (*Signum magnum*) has a different gospel—that of the Visitation, Luke 1, 41-50.

inviolable. That is the wall which guards the moat so that it cannot be filled by the enemy. If anyone loses chastity, at once his heart is filled with filth and uncleanness, so that humility, the spiritual moat, is altogether destroyed. Just as the moat is guarded by the wall, so is it necessary that the wall be guarded by the moat. For whoever loses humility of heart cannot guard the chastity of his flesh. And so it sometimes happens that virginity preserved from childhood is lost in later life. Holy Mary more perfectly than any other preserved that wall, for she was the holy virgin inviolable, whose strong wall of virginity could not be pierced by any temptation of Satan. She was a virgin before giving birth, a virgin in giving birth, and a virgin after giving birth.

If you are imitating the most blessed Mary and have this moat of humility and this wall of chastity, you must now build the great tower of charity. Just as the tower is wont to be higher than all the other buildings of the castle, so charity is above all the other virtues in the spiritual edifice of the soul. Therefore says the apostle: I show you a way which is better than any other. He said this of charity, the better way, which leads to eternal life. Those within that tower do not fear the enemy because love drives out fear when it is perfect love. Yet he who has the firm wall of chastity but does not possess the high tower of charity, either because he contemns and judges his brother or because he fails to show him the charity he should, that man allows the enemy to pierce the wall and kill his soul. Similarly, if he appears humble in his habits and life, and yet within is bitter towards his superiors and companions, the moat of humility cannot protect him from his enemies. Who can say how perfectly the most blessed Virgin built that tower? If Peter loved his Lord, how much more did the blessed Virgin love the Lord, her Son? The Lord himself has deigned to show by many miracles and visions how much she loves all mankind and prays to her Son for the whole human race.

It is futile for me even to try to show you her charity. She is so great that no mind is capable of conceiving her. She is surely that castle into which Jesus deigned to enter. And without doubt they are happier who receive him spiritually into such a castle than many who received him into

their homes during his lifetime on earth. But why is it that Jesus entered into one of the castles? One signifies singularity and this property pertains to our most blessed Lady. She is a singular castle because in no one else is there such profound humility, such perfect chastity, such excellent charity. She is the singular castle which the Father created, the Holy Spirit sanctified, and the Son entered; which the whole Trinity as a single guest has chosen. She is that castle into which Jesus entered. The gate was closed when he entered and it was closed when he left. As the prophet Ezechiel said: He led me to the gate which looketh towards the East and it was closed.³ The gate of the East is the most holy Mary, for the gate facing the East is the first to receive the sun of charity. Thus the most blessed Mary who always looked towards the East, that is, toward the brightness of God, first received a ray of light in her, as the prophet Zachary said: He has come to us like a dawning from on high. This gate was closed and well fortified. The enemy found no access, no opening at all. It was closed and sealed with the seal of chastity, which was not violated by the entrance of the Lord. Rather was it strengthened and fortified all the more by the presence of him whose gift is virginity. Into this castle Jesus entered. And if we have in us this spiritual castle he will also come to us in a spiritual way. In the blessed Mary he entered not only spiritually but also corporally, because in her and from her he assumed a body. A woman called Martha entertained him in her house and she had a sister called Mary.

If our soul has become the castle we have described it is necessary that two women live in it: one to sit at Jesus's feet that she may hear his words, the other to wait on him that he may eat. If Mary alone is in that house there would be no one to feed the Lord. Therefore, Martha signifies that action by which man labours for Christ. Mary, however, signifies that rest by which man, freed from corporal works, delights in the sweetness of God through reading, prayer, and contemplation. As long as Christ is poor and walks on the earth, hungry, thirsty, and tempted, both these women must live in one house, that is, both these actions must be

³ Ezechiel 44, 1 (Douay translation). Knox has: Then he brought me back to the eastern gate of the outer precincts, that was fast shut.

performed in the same soul. As long as you are on earth, and I, and others, he is on earth, for we are his members. As long as they who are members of Christ suffer hunger, thirst, and temptation so long does Christ suffer hunger, thirst, and temptation. Therefore, he shall say on the day of judgment: When you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me. So it is necessary in this miserable, laborious life that Martha be in our house, that is, that our soul be zealous for corporal works. As long as we must eat and drink, so long must we curb the flesh by watches, fasts, and bodily labours. This is Martha's part. Mary must also be in our soul, that is, in spiritual works. For we should not always be intent upon corporal exercises. Sometimes we should be free to taste and prove how gracious is the Lord; to sit at Jesus's feet and listen to his words. In no way should you neglect Mary on account of Martha, nor Martha on account of Mary. For if you neglect Martha, who will feed Jesus? If you neglect Mary, what does it matter that Jesus entered your house, when you taste nothing of his sweetness?

Know, then, that never in this life should these women be separated. When Jesus will no longer be poor or hungry or thirsty or tempted, then Mary alone will occupy the whole house or our soul. Saint Benedict understood this, or rather the Holy Spirit in Saint Benedict. He did not determine that we should be intent about Mary's contemplation and overlook Martha's labour, but he commended both to us and allotted certain times for the work of each.⁴ These two actions existed perfectly in our Lady. She bathed our Lord and fed him, carried him in her arms and fled with him into Egypt. All this pertains to corporal action. She meditated on his divinity, contemplated his power, and tasted his sweetness while she kept all his words in her heart. All this pertains to Mary. How beautifully the gospel says: Mary took her place at the Lord's feet and listened to his words. In accordance with Martha's role, the blessed Mary did not sit at Jesus's feet. Why rather, as I think, the Lord Jesus himself was sitting at the feet of his sweet mother. For, as the gospel says, he lived in subjection to them, that is, to Mary and

⁴ e.g. *De Hebdomadario Lectore* and *De Opera Manuum Cotidiana* (Wäffin, *Regula*, 38 and 48).

Joseph. Inasmuch as she saw and knew his divinity, she sat at his feet because she humbled herself before him and considered herself his handmaid. In the role of Martha, she ministered to him as to one weak and little, hungry and thirsty. She grieved in his passion, in the insults which the Jews committed against him. Jesus answered her: Martha, Martha, how many cares and troubles thou hast! In the role of Mary, she supplicated the Lord, she worshipped him, she longed for his spiritual sweetness. As for us, as long as we are in this body in this exile, in this place of penance, let us know that what the Lord said to Adam: Thou shalt earn thy bread with the sweat of thy brow, is more proper and natural to us. This pertains to Martha. Whatever we taste of spiritual sweetness is nothing else than a certain pittance by which God sustains our weakness. Therefore, let us do carefully those things which are Martha's, and with all care and fear let us perform those things which are Mary's. Never let us dismiss part of one for part of the other. Sometimes it will happen that Martha will wish to have Mary in her labour, but this is not to be granted to her. And she said: Lord, art thou content that my sister should leave me to do the serving alone? Come, bid her help me. This is a temptation.

It sometimes happens that when we are free for reading or prayer, our thoughts suggest to us that we should go to work. In a certain sense, Martha is calling Mary to help her, but the Lord judges justly and well. He does not order Martha to sit with Mary, nor does he order Mary to rise and serve with Martha. Altogether better and sweeter and dearer is the part of Mary. Nevertheless, he does not wish that Martha's work should be dismissed on Mary's account. The part of Martha is more laborious, yet he does not wish Mary's rest to be disturbed. He wishes that each act her own part. But those who think that some should be Marthas and some should be Marys are making a mistake and do not understand aright. Both these women live in one castle, in one house; both are pleasing and acceptable to the Lord, both beloved by the Lord, as the gospel says: Jesus loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus. Let them tell us which of the holy Fathers reached perfection without both these actions. But because both these roles must be played by each

one, at certain times we should do those things which are Martha's; at other times, those things which are Mary's, except in the case of necessity which knows no law. We must, therefore, keep those times carefully which the Holy Spirit has fixed for us. At the time of reading we should be calm and quiet, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words. At the time of labour let us be active and alert, not omitting in any way the service of truth through the plea of quiet. Let us never mingle these two unless by obedience, which we ought to prefer above all quiet or labour or anything else. Surely Mary had the sweeter part—to sit at the feet of Jesus. Nevertheless, if the Lord had ordered her, she would have risen without any hesitation and served with her sister. But the Lord, in order to commend both actions, did not command it. So let us be careful, if it is not otherwise commanded us, that we always guard these two things carefully and not give up one for the other.

We ought to consider what the Lord said: Mary hath chosen for herself the best part of all, that which shall never be taken away from her. The Lord gives us great consolation in these words. The part of Martha will be taken away from us, but not the part of Mary. Who would not loathe those labours and toils if they were to be with us always? Therefore the Lord consoles us. Let us act manfully and perform those labours and toils, knowing that they have an end. On the other hand, who would care much for those spiritual consolations if they were only to last for a lifetime? But the part of Mary will never be taken away from us; it will even be increased. What we here begin to taste in minute drops, after this life we shall drink even unto inebriation, as the prophet says: Their senses will be ravished with the treasure of thy house; thou wilt bid them drink deep at thy fountain of contentment. Therefore, let us not be overcome by these labours, because they will be taken away from us. But let us avidly desire the taste of divine sweetness. Here indeed it begins but after this life it will be perfected in us and will remain in us forever. And the blessed Mary will help us attain to this beatitude with her Son our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, world without end. Amen.