

Meditation for focus



Using Paul Leroy's 1882 painting, Jesus with Martha and Mary, as a visual aid, this guided meditation invites you to slow down and be attentive to what's in front of you.

As you focus on the colours, textures and characters, you'll hear an ancient story found in the Gospel of Luke in the Bible, which depicts Jesus' visit to the sisters' family home.

As the meditation progresses, you'll explore the story's central themes more deeply, giving you time to reflect on topics like work, relationships and spiritual nourishment – themes that continue to resonate with us today.

In this meditation, we'll explore the nineteenth century painting depicting Jesus' visit to sisters, Mary and Martha.

It was painted by the French artist, Paul Leroy.

It depicts a scene in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is invited to stay in a family home. Though it was painted over a century ago and tells a story that is thousands of years old, its themes are ones that resonate today.

Over the next few minutes, we'll quiet our breath and be attentive to what we see.

Take a deep breath in and a long breath out.

Let your eyes scan the painting.

What do you notice first? Is it the faces of the characters?

Perhaps it's the rich textures, or the use of colour.

We'll explore what the painting has to tell us.

Let's turn our attention to the figure on the left of the painting.

Martha stands while Jesus and Mary sit.

Look at her facial expression.

What do you think she's feeling?

See how she holds the jug. Imagine its cool, smooth texture on her hand.

Notice her feet on the stone floor.

Follow her gaze to the character of Jesus in the painting.
What do you notice about his face?
Where is his hand pointing?

Follow his hands towards Mary, sat on the floor.
Look at Mary's face. What is it communicating?
Notice her hands, and the relaxed way they sit together. Imagine the feeling of the mat beneath her legs.

Notice the setting. Notice how the home looks lived in. Look at the way function and beauty are present in the decor, utensils and furniture. What else do you notice about the space?

Let's turn to the original story to explore Leroy's inspiration. It's taken from the Gospel of Luke:

'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 few things are needed. Or indeed, only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

At the time of this account, Jesus was known as a teacher in the Judean countryside, where – like other rabbis or teachers – crowds followed him to listen to his teaching.

It was during such a trip that Martha had opened up her home to Jesus.

Martha is probably the older sister. It's she who invites Jesus to come and stay and assumes responsibility for making the preparations.

Perhaps she is used to taking leadership or responsibility.
In what ways do you relate to her?

In this moment, she is not at peace with her sister.
The closest relationships can sometimes be the hardest.
Are there ways you relate to this?

Martha voices her frustration and sense of injustice to Jesus.
Could you do the same?
Express this up to God like a prayer.

Do you ever feel like God favours other people over you?
Could you say how you feel?
Let it rise up like a prayer.

The story tells us that Martha's concentration is scattered.

Is any of your activity distracting you from being present to those around you or to the spiritual?

The story doesn't tell us how Martha responds to Jesus. We don't know whether she continues her work, passive aggressively, or whether she joins Mary.

The final line of the story says, "Mary has chosen what is better."
What choices have led you to where you are?
What choices are ahead of you now?

Jesus speaks tenderly to Martha, with compassion.
Imagine what a compassionate voice would say to your feelings or situation.

Scan the painting again.
Does the story help you interpret the facial expressions differently?
Do the facial expressions help you interpret the story differently?

As the meditation draws to a close, let your eyes fall on whichever part of the painting you're drawn to.
Appreciate its beauty.
Go into your day, ready to be present.