

Readings for Today: 1 John 4: 7 – 16; Ps. 33 (34) 1 – 10; John 11: 19 – 27 **or** Luke 10: 38 – 42.

The choice of today's date for this celebration is, I suppose, dictated by the now abandoned belief (in the West only) that Martha was the sister of Mary Magdalene, whose feast we kept a week ago. The Gospel of John tells us that Martha, her sister Mary, and her brother Lazarus lived together in Bethany, a village two miles from Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

Today the Roman calendar observes only Martha, but all three saints are observed in the Benedictine calendar, and, with the title 'Companions of Our Lord' in the Church of England calendar. The word 'companion' means 'one who shares the same bread', so it is highly appropriate for these friends of the Lord who appear in all four gospels as his hosts.

In particular they appear in the gospel we hear on the Monday of Holy Week: *Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table.*

Mary...anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair. The reading continues by telling us that *the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.* [John 12: 1 – 11]

Here, it seems to me (although I'm not saying the fourth evangelist intended it), we have in these three *Companions of Our Lord* three aspects of what it means to be a disciple: Martha shows her devotion to Jesus in practical service – *Martha waited on them*; Mary expresses her love for him in an extravagantly generous act – *Mary...anointed the feet of Jesus*; Lazarus was a living sign of the healing power of the Lord, who raised him from death and, simply by being there, attracted others to faith – in the process opening himself to the possibility of sharing in the passion of Jesus. Scripture tells us nothing more about Mary, Martha, or Lazarus after this supper at Bethany, but pious followers have provided much material to fill the gap! In the East it is said that they escaped to Cyprus, where Lazarus became the first bishop of Larnaca. Western tradition, dating only from the eleventh century, says that they drifted across the Mediterranean, landing on the south-east coast of France, where Lazarus became the first bishop of Marseilles, and Mary (identified with Mary Magdalen) lived a life of penitence in Provence. *Better stick to what Scripture tells us!*