

Community of Mary and Martha, Sheldon

Annual Eucharist

Saturday 30th July 2016

Genesis 18.1-8; John 12.1-8

There is nothing left of the great Oaks of Mamre where, according to the Book of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah welcomed the three angelic visitors. The story has fascinated theologians and icon writers for centuries. Today the place is all tarmac and housing, and all that remains of the ancient Byzantine Church built to commemorate the event is one tumbled-down wall.

That said, the brown dust of Hebron's streets and the smell of cooking falafels might conjure up in your imagination the scene of Abraham sitting outside his tent when, we are told, in the 'heat of the day' he offers shelter, food and drink to three strangers travelling through the desert.

But there is a deeper connection to be made here, beyond imagination, between ourselves and God, and indeed with the vocation of this community as a place of retreat and hospitality.

Providing rest and nourishment has always been a hallmark of the nomadic tribes who wander the deserts. It is a response to the most fundamental needs of fellow human beings in their vulnerability. But for the Christian, hospitality has a deeper resonance. It is an expression of the generosity of God who in Jesus Christ shares his bread with sinners, and invites people of all ages and cultures to sit and eat at his table in his kingdom.

Sadly the word 'hospitality' has become debased and cheapened by 'hospitality tents' and fast-food outlets. There is nothing cheap about genuine hospitality. It is an encounter in which not only do we recognise a guest's dependence on us, but we also recognise our own reliance on others and our inter-dependence in this world. Above all, we learn that our sufficiency comes from God alone.

'It is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2.18). So the opening pages of Genesis declare. Those of you who live and minister here know better than most how corrosive loneliness is and how it withers the human spirit. We are made for community, not isolation.

I dare say the folk who cross the threshold of Sheldon come with a variety of needs, both known and unconscious. Some come to recharge their batteries. Some seek friendship. Some have lost their way, and not a few are burnt out by ministry. Some come, not knowing exactly why they have come. As Eliot remarks in his poem 'Little Gidding':

'And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfilment.'

In the economy of God, it is not simply the guest who is blessed, it is the host too. In Genesis Abraham feels grateful for his act of service: 'When Abraham saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowing himself to the ground, said, 'My lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant.'

Recognising our need to be needed is important if we are to be effective in ministry. Self-knowledge transforms us because it breaks down the delusion of superiority. We learn that most difficult of truths distilled by John Donne that 'no man is island unto himself'.

'Life and death are with my neighbour,' said St Antony the Great. The Desert Fathers and Mothers who peopled the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine in the early centuries, withdrew from ordinary society. They lived radically simple lives given to prayer and fasting, but their aim was not solitude or asceticism, but God. And the way to God was charity.

Their life was shaped by the two great commandments: to love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. They received guests as Christ would receive them. They lived austere themselves, but when visitors came they would hide their austerity and welcome them. It is why they loved to ponder the story of Abraham and Sarah and the divine visitors, and the comment in

the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Remember to show hospitality. There are some who by so doing have entertained angels unawares' (Hebrews 13.2).

It is also why St Benedict in his Rule insisted that the life of prayer needs to be complemented by a monastery's ministry of hospitality to stranger and pilgrim for he says, 'Christ is received in their very persons'. For Benedict until I recognise Christ in the stranger sitting next to me at lunch I will not know Christ in the breaking of the bread at the Eucharist.

Guests are to be welcomed, he says, 'with all courtesy of love'. In our age when people die alone in flats and are never missed, and when in some sections of society there is a collapse of trust, it is difficult to act upon Benedict's words. Not only do we *not* talk to strangers, we view them with suspicion in case they are terrorists.

Benedict would understand our fears better than we think, but he would still bid us take risks for God. It's why hospitality is so costly because it involves taking risks. It is also costly because it requires the creation of internal space so that there is room to receive the gift of the other. Which is why as a community you need to value your privacy as much as your hospitality so that you can be genuinely open to others. You need to withdraw from time to time to safeguard your inner life because if you don't, you too will become exhausted and 'extroverted out'.

And so to Mary and Martha, under whose patronage this community sits.

In the calendar of the Church of England, Mary and Martha, along with their brother Lazarus, are called 'companions of Jesus'. This family opened their hearts to Jesus, not simply their home. I cherish the word 'companion' but it sounds a bit quaint these days. Old ladies advertise in *The Lady* for companions, but that's about it. We've lost sight of its original meaning: 'those with whom we break bread'. Companionship is perhaps the best word that describes what goes on here in terms of befriending fellow travellers on the road of life and faith.

Mary and Martha's home in Bethany lay due east of Jerusalem. These days Bethany is a Palestinian town on the far side of the security wall the Israeli Government has constructed to keep out suicide bombers. The wall may be new, but what hasn't changed over the centuries is the grinding poverty.

Like London, the rich in Jerusalem live in the west end of the city and the poor in the east. Between the two runs the Valley of Gehenna which in Jesus's day was the city rubbish dump where refuse was burnt. The prevailing wind is from the Mediterranean in the west, with the result that the smell of rotting rubbish blew over the people of Bethany, but rarely over the houses of the rich in west Jerusalem.

It is worth noting the number of times in the Gospels Jesus visits Bethany. It is yet one more indication of his solidarity with the poor. And it was out of their meagre resources that this family provided for Jesus and his disciples. Mary and Martha recognise their need of Jesus. His words and his company gave them more than ever they could give him. This guest provided them with 'the one thing that is needful': intimacy with God.

Abraham and Sarah. Mary and Martha. We carry these four people in our hearts and imaginations today as we give thanks for another wonderful year at Sheldon and all that, by the grace of God, has been achieved. We give thanks for both host and guest, for volunteers and friends, for all who have come to share its life.

We give thanks for the gift of companionship, for those 'with whom we break bread' and who make our journey through life easier. We give thanks for this place, this sacrament of the hospitality of God, and for the vocation of this community to make visible God's invitation to share his life and love for eternity.

So may God's blessing be upon you today. May his grace enrich you. But keep alert because you too may find yourselves 'entertaining angels unawares'.

+ Robert Exon