

## Listen to your distraction

Yesterday, we spent a very pleasant lunch with LLM friends at the invitation of Bishop Alan at his home in Great Missenden. As we were about to leave home, I suddenly thought, surely, we should be taking a gift of some thought, that's what we usually do when invited to someone's home. Chocolates – not a good idea in the heat, but a bottle of wine is usually welcome and that is what we took. And that got me thinking a bit more about the passages we have read this morning especially that of Abraham as generous host under the oaks of Mamre and of Martha and Mary hosting Jesus.

But unlike my event yesterday when we were clearly recipients of Bishop Alan's hospitality who exactly were the recipients of hospitality and generosity in our Genesis and Luke passages?

Both Abraham and Martha demonstrate hospitality much in the way we understand to visitors to our home although I'm not sure we could be as generous in feeding the unexpected guest as Abraham was; in place of a cup of tea and a biscuit, a full-blown feast!

Abraham is bursting with action as he looks up, runs (exceptional behaviour in ancient times, not considered dignified especially in the heat of the day), bows down, hastens into the tent and organises hospitality that far exceeds the 'little bread' he has offered. Why though? At a basic level it is because three men have suddenly appeared in the midday heat and traditional courtesy and hospitality are called for. He makes it clear to them that it would be his privilege to serve them and he pleads with them to stay. He insists that their feet be washed, a first step of desert hospitality. There are quite a few references to feet washing through both the Old and New Testaments, perhaps demonstrating how important it was considered. And I must admit that one of the reasons I'm not keen on wearing sandals is because of the gritty and hot feet I end up with. He offers a little bit of bread and then hastens to order his wife Sarah to prepare three measures, that is 22 litres of flour into bread, way more than three men could be expected to eat. He personally ran out to his herd, selected the finest of heifers, and made sure it was slaughtered, butchered, and roasted. He personally saw to it that they could drink the best of drinks, and he stood by while they ate, assuming the posture of a servant.

The generosity of the hospitality is lavish indeed. And it's not as though Abraham recognises his guests as divine beings, nor indeed that the Lord himself is among them and yet it is they who bring their amazing message to Abraham and, unlike the previous encounter which Abraham has (in chapter 17) with God when he is promised a son by his ninety-year-old wife Sarah and he falls on his face and laughs, this time it is Sarah who laughs, just on in verse 12.

Is there a question here of generosity being reciprocated by the astonishing response, the promise of a son "about this time next year"? it is interesting the number of times generosity is rewarded in kind.

If we actually read the text a bit more closely, we find some confusion in the use of pronouns; why hasn't it been tidied up?

For one thing the three figures don't draw near to Abraham, they simply materialise in front of him. Was he suffering a touch of heat? As the thermometer rises, I can appreciate that possibility. Are they one or three? "The Lord" appeared (singular). They were "three men" (plural). Now the technical term used for the appearing of a divinity is a "theophany" and the meeting by the oaks of Mamre is called that. The text starts by affirming that Abraham does meet God there "the Lord appeared" but when it comes to identifying the three beings who visit Abraham, the ground is less certain; it's a pre-Christian glimpse of the Trinity. Explaining a

theophany in story form makes it easier to grasp – after all, we all understand the courtesy of providing a welcome and refreshments to even unexpected guests.

In Colossians, Paul takes a different approach, expressing God's reality by statements in abstract terms. The passage is both inspiring and daunting at the same time. The statement "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell", or "Christ in you, the hope of glory", is difficult to get your head round although it does link quite neatly with John's incarnation-theology. Paul has received teaching about Christ in a highly concentrated form, which incorporates both past and future as well as the present into the "fullness" of Christ's identity. To be absorbed, it needs to be diluted into stories, art and music and imbibed over time. Line after line of this passage the divine nature of Christ is unwrapped, complete in itself but at the same time gathering to it what is fractured and alienated to heal and reconcile. Possibly a useful analogy would be the comparison with walking into a rich banquet convinced you only have time to grab a sandwich and gulp down some coffee.

Paul's concentrated and condensed preaching can be overwhelming with its cumulative force of truth after truth about God and Christ. But its cosmic resonance, a bit like John's prologue, does lift us out of our littleness. Perhaps something to mull on when we get bogged down in the process of the interregnum. After all nothing and no-one is beyond God's presence, or the reach and scope of his concern. But this passage is not simply about all things holding together in Christ; it is about peace and reconciliation; its about reconciling us, individually and collectively on a detailed, difficult level so that we who have been estranged and hostile in mind, can be reconciled and make 'peace through the blood of this cross'.

Far easier then to hear the divine truth in story form, when people, not principles, are the vehicle by which God enables seeds of faith to take root and grow.

So, moving on to our Gospel account of Martha and Mary's encounter with Jesus, we have another example of hospitality, this time being extended to Jesus. But here, the response of the guest is somewhat different to that given to Abraham. Martha is so preoccupied with the minutiae of providing hospitality that she cannot focus on this most important of guests; an example of doing all the right things for all the wrong reason. As we hear in the prayer of the Psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts"

In this Gospel reading we know exactly what Martha's thoughts are about her sister Mary. Martha has invited Jesus into their home, Martha is fussing and making all the food preparation and serving. Mary sits by his feet and listens to Jesus. Martha gets more annoyed and irritated by the moment until she just can't keep it in any more. "Jesus, don't you even care that Mary is just sitting there while I do all the work?"

Martha was being hospitable to a very important guest, much as Abraham was. And The New Testament makes it very clear that when your neighbour is hungry, you should feed him. When thirsty, you should give something to drink. Peter writes, "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."

But Jesus takes New Testament hospitality a step further when he says to go beyond normal duties of being a decent and kind person. If some nasty neighbour is suing you for your tunic, go ahead give him your cloak as well. If someone insists that you walk with them one mile, go ahead and go with them the second mile. If you get slapped on the right cheek for the sake of the Gospel, go ahead and turn the other cheek as well.

On the basis of that, Martha is doing what is right and God pleasing. She is going the extra mile,

and she is covering for her sister Mary. But when she just can't hold it inside for one more minute, she vents her frustration and anger and she wonders out loud why her Lord doesn't seem to be appreciating her as she deserves to be appreciated.

And how does Jesus respond? He says, Martha, you're doing a really good work here, but at this moment, it is Mary who is getting it right. Jesus' judgment is not a condemnation of Martha's work but more a comment on her distractedness. She prefers to be taken up with the necessary but perhaps not absolutely vital tasks rather spending precious moments listening to what Jesus is saying. Mary, on the other hand, grasps the moment, perhaps recognising that it will not come again. How many times have you had that experience? I know I have.

We are not told what Jesus was saying that Mary was listening to so intently. Was it perhaps about his impending suffering and death and the need for sacrifice on the part of his disciples? We know that this short passage has an urgency to it. Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem and time is short. That has to be said because when the passage is taken out of its context that urgency can be lost. The point is that the passion lies ahead and this probably makes sense of Jesus' response to the sisters. Perhaps this is the part Martha could not bear and she is not alone. All of us struggle at the challenge Jesus presents us of taking up our cross daily to follow him.

So if we look at ourselves, how much of our daily schedule is actually calculated to avoid the things that really matter, to avoid thinking about things we would prefer not to.

It was true that the preincarnate Christ came first of all to Abraham and Sarah not to be served, but to deliver divine hospitality. This visit wasn't about getting something to eat and drink, it was about God telling Sarah in person what he had already told Abraham – that she was going to have a baby. And they were still waiting and hoping and doubting, and no doubt there were many days when they wondered if the Lord was really going to come through on his word. Perhaps they prayed as did the Psalmist, search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

The good news has always been that God is a covenant God, that He keeps every promise without exception, and that it has always been about Jesus Christ coming first of all not to be served, but to serve.

So once more we are reminded that the Son of Man came first of all not to be served, but to serve. Not to be wined and dined, but to seek and to save the lost. And with that in mind, it helps us to remember that it is more blessed to listen than it is to talk or do. And then perhaps in our quiet moments, we may hear Jesus whispering into our ears, When I needed somebody to listen, you (listened) and as Paul wrote 'in him all things hold together'.

Amen