

The Gift of Christian Hospitality

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July 21, 2019 – Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Genesis 18.1-10a; Colossians 1.24-28; Luke 10:38-42

One of the great joys of our existence is to give and receive hospitality. It is something so basic to being human that it is something to be encouraged and safeguarded. Hospitality is treasured among less developed peoples because it confirms the intrinsic value of the human being – for both the giver of hospitality and the one who receives it. The act of hospitality invokes a shared spiritual heritage even between enemies, and continues it too. As with all communication, hospitality activates one of our great spiritual powers – the ability to relate, to open one’s spirit to others. We are naturally created with great openness to others, an openness that only bad experiences and our culture shut down.

The Lord Appeared

The readings today start with a text from the book of Genesis. The author says, “The Lord appeared to Abraham.” And yet, enigmatically, in the very next sentence, he says, “Abraham saw three men.” The Trinity? We do not learn any more than that. But somehow there is the hint that God is a community. As Joseph Ratzinger, when he was just a humble professor, said about the Trinity, “the Trinity is pure relatedness.” This is obviously so much more than human community, even the best of human community, but it is what we are created for, as images of God. And we can begin to experience this unity right here on earth. Remember that thing about “love thy neighbor”? Being hospitable is the start of that.

From the apparition of the three men, the story moves immediately to Abraham responding to them with hospitality. He gets food prepared, and he waits on them. This is the greatest image of faith that there could ever be – no wonder that Abraham is known as the father of faith. Faith is the way we open ourselves up to what God reveals. After all, we are participants in *his* drama! One of the great lessons here is that faith is being hospitable to what God is doing. All of his history with the People of God, all of his truth, all of his grace should be welcomed by us with open-hearted generosity. When we do that we are echoing, in a modest way, the hospitality that God has in sharing his life with us.

Then there is the responsorial psalm (Psalm 15), which has an apparently different theme: He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord. However, as one writer has put it, “justice is, first and foremost, a relational term – people living in right relationship with God, one another, and the natural creation.” In fact, hospitality is part of justice. Acting out of deep respect for others is an important part of what God considers just. The psalm identifies other characteristics of God’s justice: “thinking the truth in one’s heart, one who slanders not with his tongue.” Both of these are worthy characteristics of one who would be in the presence of God who, after all, is Truth. Remember that both the intellect and the will play a role in being human and in choosing to speak the truth and do good.

The psalm constitutes a kind of list of commandments of those who would be just on a daily basis. These commandments will make us just. However, as Saint Paul reminded us again and again, having the commandments is one thing, while following them consistently is quite another. Moreover, the consistency in following is very, very satisfying because it puts us in the presence of God. The truth and goodness of the person who does these things is very

like God himself, as that person is beginning to share in his ethos. But not quite! It is not as simple as that. For our nature is radically different from God's nature, of course.

Keeping the Word

This is where Christ comes in, the one who unites the two natures in one person. The second reading is part of one of Paul's letters to the Church community in Colossae. He puts before us the mystery of Christian life that he is already living. Just hearing about the mystery gets us out of the simple voluntaristic picture that we might have been left with from the two Old Testament texts with which we began. Our willpower alone is not sufficient for achieving the kind of hospitable community that we are hearing about.

Paul's mention of his own sufferings adds flesh to the rather sterile picture of programmatic goodness. Suffering is the door into the fleshly human experience that Paul lived, as well as a daily reminder of the dusty, risky, peripatetic life that Jesus himself lived. Paul identifies the mystical bond that he is living with God and with the Church of Colossae, even as he goes about his ministry.

The Colossian Church can then learn something vital from Paul's words about suffering. Suffering is a frequent companion in human life, but when one is living in the spirit of Christ, suffering can be borne for Christ, for the sins of the world. It is not that Christ's sufferings were deficient in some way, but we can make his redemptive power present in our time and place. In effect, we are being Christ, in a meaningful way, in our local community. In Paul's language, this is what he means by "keeping the word." In terms of the first two readings, this is being hospitable to the word and thus responsive to the world.

The gospel acclamation speaks about being blessed: "Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart and yield a harvest through perseverance." Already in this life, keeping the word leads to an overflowing of goodness into the larger community. For example, Abraham and Sarah were to receive a son. The Church at Colossae receives the word from Paul, and thus they learn how to live in Christ in their city. And so the city of Colossae benefits as well.

Martha and Mary

The gospel tells one of the well-known stories of hospitality in the New Testament, the gathering of Jesus with Martha and Mary. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him. Listening to one's guests is essential to hospitality, but there is more going on here. That "more" is exposed when Martha gets angry about Mary just sitting there. Jesus' answer to Martha: "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Jesus is the one who is the perfect human being – and the only one. We can learn only from Christ what being human is all about. He alone knows how the fullness of human existence plays out in time. This involves faith in creation through the Word as well as an act of faith in the Incarnation itself. Mary has discovered that she is sitting before the fountain of all meaning and all love. Listening to him is ultimately what she was created for.

Martha missed all of that. She knew that one rightly serves food to guests, but she seems to have gone too far, wanting everything to be just perfect. It is like getting bogged down with all the work that goes into organizing a wedding – finding the right dress, fixing up the church, planning the reception – and then forgetting the prayer and the spiritual preparation!

Being hospitable to the divine Word leads to an amazing spiritual expansion on our part that we cannot even imagine beforehand. We take in his grace and truth. Thus refreshed, we develop a face-to-face relationship with the Lord, right here on earth. The kind of hospitality that Abraham exercised in the first reading was of the same kind. He was face-to-face with God too.

Written into our spirits is the duty to be hospitable to the whole world. This is a created version of God's hospitality under the rubric of being the Good. Man, precisely as the image of God, must develop his nature as image to have a fulfilled life and one that is open to divine revelation. Ultimately, this duty is just a rephrasing of the commandment to "love thy neighbor," which is not so much an imposition of some extraneous law by a demanding God as it is a command to uncover our true nature. God is good!

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1950-1986*
- *Emily J. Cook, "[Hospitality Is Biblical – And It's Not Optional](#)"*
- *Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "[Mary, Martha and the Catholic Fullness](#)"*
- *Kathleen Naab, "[Are We So Busy We Never Listen, Pope Asks at Angelus](#)"*

In Short . . .

- *Hospitality activates one of our great spiritual powers – the ability to relate, to open one's spirit to others.*
- *Faith is being hospitable to what God is doing, for all of his truth and grace should be welcomed by us with open-hearted generosity.*
- *Suffering is frequent in human life, but when one lives in the spirit of Christ, suffering can be borne for Christ, for the sins of the world.*
- *Jesus is the one perfect human being, and we learn only from him what being human is all about.*
- *"Love thy neighbor" is not so much an imposition of some extraneous law by a demanding God as it is a command to uncover our true nature.*