

When God Comes as Guest

16th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 21 July 2019

Readings: Gen 18:1-10a; Col 1:24-28; Lk 10:38-42

“It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her” (Lk)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading begins quite casually with: “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre....” as if this happens every day. This event occurs some twenty years after God promises Abram that he will be the father of multitudinous progeny. Despite being childless after so many years, Abraham has faith in God and still trusts in God’s providence. Here, it’s not clear whether he recognizes the three guests as being divine beings in disguise. Nonetheless, he and Sarah rise up to the occasion to make the guests feel extremely welcome and comfortable—a ‘must do’ duty in oriental traditions of hospitality. The providing of warm water for washing of guests’ feet was necessary for those travelling, often barefoot, over the hot sands of the desert which surrounds Hebron. Abraham and Sarah leave no stone unturned to make the three guests feel, quite literally, ‘divine’! The freshly-baked bread, tender veal, curds and milk seem to be a sumptuous midday meal! Indeed, Russian artist Andrei Rublev has painted the three guests in his famous icon ‘The Hospitality of Abraham’, which is seen as a prefiguration of the three persons of the Trinity. Be that as it may, the point of the whole episode is that God works in wondrous ways, for nothing is impossible for God.
2. Annunciation scenes are Biblical devices to disclose the meaning of God’s acts in salvation history. The birth of a major figure in salvation history – often a ‘supernatural’ birth – is announced by an angel. There is indication in this narrative that the three visitors are divine beings since they say to Abraham: “Where is your wife Sarah?” How did they know this if they were but human beings? This detail apart, the birth of Isaac is supernatural since Abraham and Sarah are both advanced in age to become parents. It’s natural that this strange news evokes laughter. Abraham is pulled up for Sarah’s disbelief: “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” As parting gift the guests promise them that Sarah will eventually bear them a son: Isaac.
3. Evangelist Luke places the scene of Jesus at the home of his friends, Martha and Mary, in Bethany immediately *after* the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Last Sunday). Today’s reading could serve as a corrective should anyone conclude that mere ‘*doing* good’ is proof enough of one’s love. True ‘doing’ must spring from ‘being’ attentive to the voice of God’s Spirit. By all established and expected standards of hospitality, Martha is a hostess par excellence: very concerned about feeding this highly honoured guest, Jesus, yet, “distracted by her many tasks” and insistent that her sister, Mary, help out in the preparations. In response to Martha’s plea: “tell her to help me,” Jesus seems to tell her that she is, indeed, ‘*doing*’ good; but Mary is ‘*being*’ better simply because she is ‘being’ with the Word and listening to his words. Mary has chosen “the *better* part which will not be taken away from her.” The godly guest, Jesus, desires not just to eat food cooked by, and with, his friends; but also, to *be food* for them. He seeks to nourish them with his wisdom and his love, which

Mary is only too pleased to taste and treasure, while she silently “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” (v.39)

Insight into the Psalm:

Today’s psalm (15) is an ‘entry psalm’ sung by pilgrims who entered the Temple of Jerusalem. It describes the ideal pilgrim – just, sincere, truthful, and faithful. Used for Abraham, who is seen as a pilgrim, marked by his faith and justice, the psalm is a fitting response to the first reading.

Three Voices from Tradition:

St Augustine (354-430): “There were then in that house these two lives, and Himself, the Fountain of life. In Martha was the image of things present, in Mary of things to come. What Martha was doing, that we are now; what Mary was doing, that we hope for. Let us do the first well, that we may have the second fully.

St Gregory the Great (540-604): “For what is set forth by Mary, who sitting down gave ear to the words of our Lord, save the life of contemplation? And what by Martha, so busied with outward services, save the life of action? Now Martha’s concern is not reprov’d, but that of Mary is even commended. For the merits of the active life are great, but of the contemplative, far better.”

Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI (Angelus Message on July 18, 2010): “Christ’s words are quite clear: there is no contempt for active life, nor even less for generous hospitality; rather, a distinct reminder of the fact that the only really necessary thing is something else: listening to the word of the Lord; and the Lord is there at that moment, present in the Person of Jesus! All the rest will pass away and will be taken from us but the word of God is eternal and gives meaning to our daily actions.”

Three Current Concerns:

The Host Concern: Hospitality is a great virtue, especially in the Indian tradition where we have sayings like ‘*atithi devo bhava*’ (guest is god). We are called to be generous hosts with open doors. Moreover, that guest at Bethany is also the ‘Host’ at Mass. Indeed, God’s table is always spread and overflowing, with Jesus as Host. Sit, listen, pray and dine! That, apparently, is the ‘better part’ – and, it will never be taken away from you!

The Guest Concern: Are you a good guest? As host, you fix the menu and call the shots. As guest, you must eat what is set before you, and adapt to the cultural world of your host. We pride ourselves at being good hosts. Are we gracious and grateful guests, as well?

‘Marthaism’ is a Concern expressed by Pope Francis: referring to “excessive industriousness; the sickness of those who immerse themselves in work, inevitably neglecting ‘the better part’ of sitting at Jesus’ feet.”

In Lighter Vein: Little Joey declared, “Mummy, I want a baby brother.” His mother replied, “But you’ve just got one.” Joey continued, “But I want another.” Mummy explained that it took time to produce a baby, whereupon Joey suggested, “Why don’t you do what Daddy does at the factory?” “What’s that?” asked mummy, puzzled. “Put more men on the job.” Like Joey, Martha wants one more woman, Mary, in the kitchen. Instead of being hostess, couldn’t she choose to be nourished by The heavenly Host, her Lord Jesus?
