

When homilies and holiness evoke hospitality

13th Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – June 28, 2020

Readings: 2 Kgs 4:8-11, 14-16a; Rom 6:3-4, 8-11; Mt 10:37-42

*“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me;
and those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me”* (Mt 10:40)

Prologue: Two of today’s readings—the first and the third—focus on hospitality. Biblical pictures of hospitality mirror common understandings of hospitality in the ancient world. The Greeks saw it as a sign of being civilized; with Zeus, the chief deity, being god of hospitality. For the Egyptians, being hospitable helped to secure access to a favourable next life; while the Romans made welcoming strangers a sacred duty. In the readings of today, hospitality is outcome of the guest being godly and holy, as well as being adept in breaking God’s word—a good homilist, so to say!

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In today’s first reading the wealthy woman of Shunem is a perfect hostess to prophet Elisha. She tells her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God” (v.9). Elisha’s holiness inspires her to make special arrangements for his board and lodge. Something in Elisha’s speech and demeanour attracted him to her and her husband. Therefore, instead of the regular shelter traditionally made of branches and leaves, she arranges for a walled chamber atop her house and installs furniture—a bed, table, chair and lamp—as a mark of respect and reverence for him. This generous gesture of hospitality resembles another act of hospitality bestowed on Elisha’s prophet-predecessor, Elijah, who is fed by the widow of Zarephath, whose son he restores to life. She says: “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth” (1 Kings 17:24). Common to both these acts of hospitality is that the prophets Elijah and Elisha are recognized as being true messengers of God’s word since they ‘walk the talk’, so to say. In them words, works and witness coincide. Their homilies are outcome of their holiness. Thus, in them, people sense the power of God’s word and respond generously. Another point common to both these stories is that while Elijah raises the widow’s dead son to life, Elisha predicts that the barren wealthy woman will soon bear a son. Indeed, their words are God’s words; hence, they are efficacious in producing the desired results in concrete historical contexts and circumstances.
2. The gospel passage contains the last installment of Jesus’s missionary mandate to the Twelve apostles. It contains three complexes of material: (i) the warning that discipleship is costly and might involve the breaking of family ties; (ii) the cross is essential to true discipleship; and, (iii) three sayings about the reception given to God’s messengers. The first two clearly go hand-in-hand; meaning, all relationships must be seen in the light of the most fundamental relationship, i.e., one’s relationship with God who is the Alpha and the Omega of all loving relationships. Thus, while the natural ties of blood and family are important, they must be subjected to loving God fully. This will obviously mean bearing one’s cross and walking in the footsteps of our Lord: Jesus. In Jesus’ teachings about the reception of disciples, one point must be stressed, i.e., the disciple stands in place of the Master and therefore speaks not his own word but amplifies his master’s voice. Thus, the reception or rejection of Jesus’ disciples is tantamount to the reception or rejection of Jesus

himself: “Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me!” Note that this ‘welcome’ does not only refer to ‘opening of one’s door’ but also ‘opening of one’s heart’ to welcome not merely the messenger, but the message, as well.

3. The three words in the gospel passage—prophets, righteous persons, little ones—all refer to the same group of Jesus’ messengers or disciples. They are ‘prophets’ because they announce and denounce in Christ’s name; they are ‘righteous ones’ because they are holy and will always walk the right road, and they are ‘little ones’ since they do not have any social, political or familial power; hence, they are totally dependent on God, on the one hand, and on the hospitality offered to them by those who hear God’s voice through them, on the other. Even little acts of kindness and hospitality accorded to them will be rewarded simply because they do not stand or speak for themselves, but for Jesus and his Abba-God.

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme:

The psalm (89) portrays the coming of the ideal Davidic king with a focus on love, truth and faithfulness. In its broad sense, it can be understood as a universal hope for any leader to be loving, truthful and faithful. Elisha was seen as one such prophet; and the disciples of Jesus are certainly expected to be so, too. The dying and rising reference in the second reading refers to a past and the future, respectively. Our ‘dying’ is daily on account of our sins and weaknesses. However, this should not deter us from being hopeful by virtue of being baptized, i.e., being immersed in the life and love of Christ through the Spirit. This must make us launch out in love towards others.

Three Contextual Concerns:

The National Concern: In India, the guest is demigod: “*atithi devo bhava.*” People normally give great respect and are very hospitable to Jesus’ disciples: priests and nuns, at large. But, what about the rest of Jesus’ disciples, God’s children, who are hungry, homeless, helpless?

The Hostility-Hospitality Concern: Hospitality derives from ‘*hostis*’ meaning ‘alien’. True hospitality comes with welcoming the ‘alien’—not friends—with open arms, open doors, open hearts. Do I hand over the keys of my home and my heart to the ‘alien other’ and let her/him inhabit what I consider exclusively ‘mine’? Only when the stranger-guest inhabits my home and heart on her/his terms, will true Christian hospitality shine like the sun.

The Host-Guest Concern: Jesus was always a guest, never a host, except at the Last Supper. With our resources, it is perhaps easier to be host than guest. Being guest implies gratefully receiving whatever one gets: a total detachment with regard to rewards, recognition and recompense. Are we, as individuals and Church, good guests, too?

In Lighter Vein:

“I’m going to marry that girl across the street!” announced Frank, one day. “But,” protested dad, “She’s a pauper!” Mother complained, “She has no standing in society!” Sister sighed, “What an ugly duckling!” and brother added, “She dresses up shabbily!” “True, true, true!” said Frank, “But, she has one supreme advantage over all of us!” Curious, everybody asked, “What’s that?” Frank whispered, “She has no family!” Families often come in the way of opening hearts and homes. But, especially in these troubled Covid-19 times, let us open our hearts and homes to welcome even strangers. Who knows? They could be god.
