

Sermon: The First Sunday after Trinity (14 June 2020)

“The Hospitality of God”

Readings: Genesis Ch 18:1-15; Matthew Ch 9:35 to Ch 10:8

I want to speak for a little while today about the hospitality of God. And straightaway let me say that my title is, perhaps, misleading. Look at the two readings, and you will see that it is not God who is being hospitable in either but rather, in the passage from Genesis, he is the recipient of hospitality from Abraham and Sarah, and in Matthew Jesus encourages the disciples to accept whatever hospitality they are given while out on mission. So, it might be better to say that I’m going to talk about hospitality generally, and how our hospitality fits into God’s own mission.

In our reading from Genesis we find another part of the story of Abraham, the great patriarch of Jewish history. He begins his life as a stranger (a wandering Aramean is the way he is described elsewhere in the Old Testament) and at God’s call he travels from Haran in modern day Turkey to Canaan. On this great journey he camps out at Mamre, under the oak trees there, and this is where we find him and Sarah.



In this photograph you have some idea of what these oak trees look like. They are the most common species of tree in Israel, and at one time were used as hard wood for building ships, and ploughs and yokes for farming. The tree’s bark was also used to provide tannin to dry skins and leather, and its acorns as food for a kind of bread. In the Bible, they were also associated with power, strength,

or longevity in the sense of a long life. The oaks at Mamre are being used by the author of this story to symbolise Abraham’s long life. One such oak near Hebron, named after him, is believed to be over 850 years old.

In this passage we find Abraham sitting at the door of his tent, in the heat of the day. Out of the blue three strangers arrive. He rushes out to meet them, sits them down, washes their feet and brings them food and drink. As readers we soon learn that Sarah and Abraham are not entertaining just any old guests, but in welcoming these strangers they are providing a meal for two angels and the Lord God. Occasionally these three are referred to in the plural, but sometimes the story switches to the singular form, as when we are told that the Lord appears or speaks to Abraham alone, and Abraham addresses him as “My Lord”.

The immediate consequence of their gift of hospitality is that the Lord makes a promise to Sarah that at first seems too outrageous, given her age; that she will give birth to a son. And as we know that son will be called Isaac, our transliteration of the Hebrew word *Yiṣḥāq* (יִשְׁחָק), meaning "He laughs" or "He will laugh". That of course is a direct reference to the way in which Sarah greets this news. Standing behind the scenes, as it were, but listening in on the conversation, she laughs inwardly at the absurdity of it all. And the Lord, knowing of her inward response, accuses her of not taking the promise seriously; whether He does so in some anger or in humour, we cannot be sure.

This story has been interpreted in Christian faith ever since as the first image we have in the Bible of God as the Holy Trinity. That is certainly the way in which it has been used in art. The image with which, perhaps, we are all most familiar in this regard is Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the three strangers at table, with the open fourth side left free for us, inviting our participation. Here is a more modern representation of that famous icon:



But, here's the thing. The story as we have it in Genesis is quite clear. The three visitors are the Lord God and two angels. There's no room, in other words, for us to interpret this as an image of the Trinity. But the fact remains that the image has influenced artists ever since, and I want for a few minutes to consider two very different versions of this image, one from before the time of Rublev, and the other from our own contemporary situation.

The first comes from the 6th Century and you will find it depicted in one of the glorious mosaics commissioned for the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, built between 526 and 547 AD. This is the third image below:

Notice what the artist has done with the story; what every artist does with source material like this. It has been given a contemporary setting. The mosaic presents all four characters in clothing of the period. The three "guests" are dressed in the toga worn in upper-class Roman society. Some have suggested that they may be wearing its late-antique successor, the Pallium, a much simpler cloak that Christians were wearing by the third century. Abraham, on the other hand, is dressed fashionably (if humbly) in a short tunic decorated with rondels, and this was a style of clothing typical of the late Roman Empire. The "guests" sit for their meal; they don't recline, as we have tended to

assume was universal, and which was actually a feature of upper-class banqueting and more formal meals. The table is a simple wooden construction; nothing fancy. And note the loaves, which appear both as plates and food. They are not at all like the cakes we are told that Sarah prepares for them, but rather are represented here as “Panis Qvadrates”, a common loaf that had pre-formed divisions to make it easier to break up into portions for sharing. Larger loaves had six or eight; the smaller “Qvadratvs” only four, and you can see why it became a favourite of early Christians, baked already marked with the sign of the Cross.



But let me return to my earlier point. The hospitality that is being offered here is from Abraham to the Lord God and the two angels accompanying him. We have to keep that in mind when we come to consider what God’s own hospitality looks like. And the image is also a reminder of the many meals that Jesus himself receives at the table of others in the gospels, both foes and friends. God is not always the host. In many instances he is also our guest, and later on I wish to suggest that there could be a model in that idea for our own service to others.



The second image I wish to show is, I suspect, a little more difficult. Here it is, and I leave it to you to consider for one moment.

Some people may think it goes too far. You may even consider it blasphemous. In place of the three men of the original Genesis story, we have three women, all of whom represent very different ethnicities to that more traditional image of the white man. The icon is by an artist called Kelly Latimore, and was

commissioned for Trinity Wall Street Church in New York. We can best understand it if we also remember how much of our talk about God is always through the use of metaphors. In Western Christianity our principal image of God has traditionally been monarchical, with both Father and Son pictured sitting on thrones, above all things. The Christian idea of the Trinity, however, suggests a very different way of

understanding who God is, so that today we can speak not so much about the power of God but more about his interior relationships, the indwelling of the three persons.

It is useful to remember that Rublev's icon was also original in its time, drawing on the story of the three angels who visit Abraham and Sarah in order to picture this triune relationship in God. And Kelly Latimore's icon takes that idea one stage further, by re-interpreting Rublev's icon to see the angels as female, and therefore allowing us language to speak of God with feminine images.

So, do these mages go too far for you? If you asked the artist himself, he would reply "no", arguing that the images we need today as Church need "re-shaping, re-imagining, and re-wondering". If you look at the homepage of his website, you will find there some words of justification for what he does:

"I was not taught by a traditional iconographer, and so to some, I am breaking many rules. There are icons here that people may find theologically unsound and wrong, or for others, helpful and inspiring. I think both reactions are important. My hope is that these icons do what all art can potentially do, which is, to create more dialogue.....by transcending our biases, listening and having inner silence about our convictions, our inherited traditions, or our favourite ideas we can become open to the patterns of work, knowledge and experience we may not have seen in the other or buried in ourselves."

We can perhaps get a better sense of this by thinking about the use of colour in this icon. In traditional iconography, the colour blue always represents divinity (in sea and the sky, for example) and the colour red represents the blood of humanity. Hence Jesus on the left of the image. The Holy Spirit, meanwhile, is dressed in the colour green, and she represents further ideas of growth, wilderness, nature, and of the earth. She is the one holding out her hand inviting us forward to join them at the table.

And notice also the rainbow tablecloth, designed to symbolise the fact that all people, regardless of race, gender or sexuality, are welcome at table. In the background, as in Rublev's original image, we see a Temple, where God dwells, a tree to represent Christ crucified, and a mountain to symbolise the Spirit calling us out into the wilderness, towards a new way of being God's people.

And then consider the final image. In place of the cup of Communion, as in Rublev's version, we see instead simple grapes and wheat, the raw ingredients that need to be made into bread and wine. There is still work to be done, in other words.

It is that thought that I wish to end with, as we return to the idea that provides the theme for this sermon, and which along the way appears to have been left behind; the idea of the "hospitality of God".

"Come risen Lord, and deign to be our guest" you might recognise as the first line of a famous hymn. God deigns (condescends, or humbles himself) to join us at table. And what is true for him is also meant to be true for us. As he joins us in hospitality,

so we are invited in our turn to be hospitable. So God's hospitality is demonstrated in the fact that we are invited to share his mission. This is worth remembering, because so often this simple truth can get lost. The mission is the Lord's.....not ours. Sometimes we can make the mistake of thinking that everything depends on us; that we are the ones who succeed or fail. It should be of comfort for us to remember that this has never been the case. We are invited to share in what God has planned. That is why the final image in the Kelly Latimore icon is so revealing; the grapes and wheat that still need to be made into wine and bread. We have a job to do, in other words, and the ingredients are to be found at the Lord's Table.

This invitation to share in God's mission is there in the promise given to Abraham and Sarah of the birth of a son, Isaac, even in old age. It is, in other words, the promise of a whole people who will carry forth the life of God into other ages and cultures. It is there in the simple instructions that Jesus gives his disciples as he sends them out on mission in our reading from Matthew:

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

As with the wheat that sits on the table of the Lord, so also with the wheat that still needs to be gathered in from the harvest field. There is a job for us to do. But what does this job look like? What might our mission be for the future? A few pointers with which to finish:

The story of Abraham and Sarah at Mamre brings together several strands of Hebrew thinking about the stranger that you find over and over again in the Bible. The promise given to them is intended to be a promise with universal significance; the command to love is a command not just to love God and to love our neighbour, but to love the stranger and the alien too. There can be no ethnic boundaries in the Kingdom of God. How much do we need to hear that message at this time! So, three questions we might wish to ask ourselves:

How welcome, really, is the stranger in my Church on a Sunday morning?

How would I feel when, just as I was looking for a moment's peace and quiet, I was disturbed by the arrival of three strangers? How far does my hospitality extend?

And last but not least, how seriously do I listen to what strangers have to say to me?

We cannot do so at the moment (or at least we can't very easily), but every time we share in the meal of the Lord's Table, we are also invited to share in his mission. Our rising up from table is also our weekly commissioning to be the Church more fully, more alive, than when we first knelt there, and to remember what we have always known; that in the Kingdom of God there are no strangers. **AMEN**