

Hospitality!

Genesis 18¹⁻¹⁰; Psalm 15; Colossians 1¹⁵⁻²⁸; Luke 10^{38-end}

*My Lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant.
[Genesis 18³]*

When Bishop Rowan was with us he stayed at the Convent for the Friday night. As we were leaving on the Friday I asked him what we wanted to do on the free Saturday evening: a bit of peace and time by himself; a meal in Birmingham; or for dinner at the Rectory? He opted for the Rectory (meaning an unscheduled 0630 shopping trip) and, at the end of the sessions on the Saturday, I asked if he wanted me to come back for him or if he was coming with us immediately. He soon appeared, looking very much like Paddington Bear, with his duffle coat and his bag. One of the Sisters asked if he had his key and he thanked them for their hospitality and said he had left it on the pillow. It dawned on me that he was intending to stay with us. As I opened the door, I shouted, 'Penny, is the Bishop in the green room?' The casual 'yes' belied the frenetic activity that made it appear as if this was what was expected all along!

The thread weaving its way through the readings today is that of hospitality. Our homes can become one of the most powerful and positive tools for mission as we make people welcome and especially as we share food together.

- ✦ Abraham teaches us something about hospitality that isn't always immediately obvious in the frenetic activity in the text - it takes time. The idea that he rushes around instructing Sarah to **make cakes**, and the servant who **took a calf...and hastened to prepare it** and the **curds** he set before the three men (often believed to be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who visit the Patriarch. But killing and cooking a calf takes some hours. It is in this time that conversations can become real and meaningful.

For Abraham, the promise from this visit was **your wife Sarah shall have a son**. Our reading stops before Sarah laughs at this news - because realism and faith are opposites. Just as Sarah found it hard to believe that she would host a child and so, through him, allow God to make a difference to an embryonic nation, some of us find it difficult to accept that our offer of hospitality can be used by that same God to make a difference to those around us.

- ✦ You can see the Psalm that those are able to receive God's hospitality could be regarded as the perfect guest - I will leave that for you to have a look at in your own time!
- ✦ We could spend a long time exploring Paul describing the hospitality the human Jesus, the primary person and being in all creation, offers the divine - **in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell**. Paul goes on to point out that it is our willingness to be hospitable to Christ that is the basis of our faith - **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. Perhaps in three years time, when these readings come round again.
- ✦ More accessible is the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha (and Lazarus, although Luke doesn't mention him). You can just feel the tension mounting as Martha feels left to do all the work to make Jesus welcomed as the family friend he was, while Mary sits listening to Jesus.

There are perhaps two things we can learn from this:

1. We have to be careful in our relationship with Jesus that we don't do exactly what we like and think that he will bless it. Jesus' response to Martha, **Mary has chosen the better part**, is not what Martha wanted to hear. Whatever we do and whoever we are grows out of our relationship with Christ.
2. When we offer hospitality, it is a tool for building God's kingdom, it isn't an end in itself. You may want to treat people like royalty, but it is better to introduce them to the King!

I remember as a student in London having an adventure each Sunday - we would turn up at the Church we were assigned to and almost always got invited to someone's home for lunch. It was an adventure!

As we get ready for the next phase of our Church life, where the priorities will shift away from buildings and focus on building the congregation, it isn't just the Parish Church that will have to learn to be hospitable, but that each of us sees our own homes as extensions of that hospitality.