

Genesis 18.1-10a; Ps 15; Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 38- end

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I don't know what would happen in your household when three people turn up unannounced and expect hospitality. Most of us love to entertain but, even in this day of freezers and long-term storage, we like a bit of notice. For us, preparation is part of the hospitality. What do/don't they like? What allergies do they have? And what did we feed them last time!?

Abraham recognises his obligation to travellers. Food, drink and shelter were a matter of life and death and he welcomes them, as he should. He obviously doesn't send out for a pizza. Sarah is instructed to prepare bread and the fatted calf is brought in and 'prepared' before it is cooked.

No-one is in a hurry, and the visitors bring strange but welcome news. Sarah, supposed to be barren, is to bear a son. In their very old age, the line is secured and we know what grew from that.

But it is an odd tale. Abraham doesn't do much but entertain the guests as Sarah and the servant get to work according to his instructions.

And Sarah, we read, is not within the group when this news is announced. She can only lurk and overhear. Later in the chapter, there is an interesting exchange when she laughs at the thought of it all. But nothing is too great for the Lord.

And we jump ahead to Bethany where Martha and Mary are offering hospitality to Jesus. Interestingly it is the home of Martha, unusual for a woman in Jesus' time to be identified as the owner of the home. Martha knows her obligation, like Abraham, and sets to work. Sister Mary, however, sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to him.

Most people I discuss this family exchange with fall on the side of Martha. It's a bit much, isn't it, that I get to do all the work while you sit there at the feet of the master! Yet Jesus doesn't see it that way.

Well, how far down the rabbit hole do we wish to go in discussion of gender politics, especially in the church? But why doesn't he see it as Martha does? Some commentators struggle to wriggle out of this one, as does your humble homilist today. But let me try.

It is unusual that Mary gets to sit at the feet of the teacher, who says that there is 'one thing needed' for true hospitality and Mary understands that. That one thing is a matter of getting priorities right.

Let me suggest that here is the theology of priority. You have heard me enough saying that our great challenge lies in making sense of scripture, of the need to bring it into the present, into our personal life, texts

written two thousand years ago and more demand a hermeneutic where they can make sense now.

It is axiomatic that we live in increasingly busy times where abundant priorities lead us into a world of choices than was once the case. And on Sunday, where once there was nothing but church, there are many more distractions, worthy as many may be, than a commitment to common worship. That is not least a challenge in our ministry to the young where, dare I say, much more attractive options can take precedence.

How, then are we to reconcile our spiritual life with the pressing and urgent necessities of modern living?

Mary and Martha present a picture of how we are to live and love. We must love God as a priority, which means being in what I call Godspace. We must also love our neighbour as ourselves, which means serving them. Only if the worshipful, contemplative life is a sister to the active, practical life will we have a complete spirituality, that is, one that will please God and satisfy the universal human search for meaning and wholeness.

But there are few worshipers and contemplatives left. Where have they gone? They've been sucked into the modern dream of hard work and self-reliance, self-esteem, and self-sufficiency. It's not that Martha's service is unimportant but that she may have lost that balance, that sense of the right priority.

The work begins, the distractions occupy, preoccupy her mind and her heart. And she turns to bitterness and resentment. But the full range of hospitality demands that the guest be heard, especially given who that guest is. To offer hospitality to Jesus means to listen to what he has to say.

In some traditions, the work of the deacon (Diakonos) is certainly one of service but it is linked essentially with a ministry of the word. Immersion into the word, the logos, the very being of God in this time and space inspires, equips and enables us then to serve. Word and service, in that order.

No, I am not suggesting for an instant that if someone falls over in the street we say 'OK, let's all pray' before we go to assist. If prayerfulness has been our way of being, we live already in an attitude of deep

prayerfulness and can offer help and care. And we will do it better as a result.

Hospitality, for me, means living with and within each other, the reciprocity I mentioned last week. We welcome God into our very being as Christ welcomes us into his, to be his body wherever we are.

There is a little verse from I Thessalonians 5, which I love to share. Three words - pray without ceasing.

People react by saying that we wouldn't get much else done, but that is to misapprehend the nature of prayer. Prayerfulness doesn't require of us that we are constantly on our knees, talking at God or with an endless list of things for God to do.

If I may corrupt St Francis, let me say *pray without ceasing, wherever and whenever, and if you must, use words*. I find that words can impede my prayer life. What is best is an attitude of openness in heart and mind that leaves the shape and the form to God.

And let us not forget the hospitality that God offers us today. It is a very simple meal, but we don't get to the table before we have given attention to the great presence of the one who is here with us, within us and of what is asked of us. Then we can feast in the right frame of mind and of being.

So let us, like Mary, choose the better part as our priority. For me, I find that when I do, the work of the kitchen is better, too.