

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As a priest I am often invited into the homes of parishioners and at times to share a meal with them. Whenever we experience the hospitality of others something rather beautiful happens doesn't it. We are made to feel valued and important. And when we are the ones who offer hospitality to others, we open our hearts to the gift that the person we make welcome may be offering to us.

We have two stories today that help us to reflect upon hospitality. The first from the Book of Genesis tells us how Abraham and his wife Sarah offered hospitality to three strangers who seemed to be just passing by. But when Abraham saw them, he ran from his tent and begged them to stay and have a wash and be refreshed. "Let me fetch a little bread and you shall refresh yourself before going further. That is why you have come in your servant's direction." Abraham saw those visitors not as a burden to him, but as a gift. When they agree to accept his hospitality, Abraham rushes off to the tent and asks Sarah to bake some bread. He tells her to knead three bushels of flour into loaves. I haven't seen a bushel for a while, so I had to look it up. My dictionary tells me that a bushel is equivalent to 36 litres. If Sarah had done what she had asked she would have made enough bread to fill the shelves of Bakers Delight.

It was an expression of lavish hospitality that was in tune with the fine and tender calf was killed along with the cream and milk that was offered. Abraham doesn't partake of the meal but stands near them under a tree. Without knowing it, Abraham was really entertaining God. Those three men who were offered such beautiful hospitality promised that Sarah in her old age would conceive a son.

In our gospel we go with Jesus to experience the hospitality of the two sisters Martha and Mary. Martha is the one who welcomes Jesus into the house. It is a bit radical that it is a woman who offers a man hospitality in her own house. As Luke is telling the story he may well be saying something about female leadership in the Church community to which he is writing. Martha offers Jesus what would be considered the normal hospitality of one who comes to visit. She sits him down and then goes off to the kitchen to put the kettle on and prepares the food that will be offered to her guest. But it is her sister Mary who chooses to sit at the feet of Jesus and to listen to whatever it is that he wanted to say to her.

We can understand why Martha got a bit annoyed about that. She asked Jesus to intervene and to send her sister out into the kitchen where she could help with the serving. But Jesus doesn't do that. He gently reminds Martha that hospitality is much more than offering

someone food. He tells her that she is distracted by all her serving. She is distracted from the central point of hospitality, that of being attentive to the one who has come to visit. Mary had chosen the better part. She had chosen to offer hospitality to Jesus in its purest form by being totally attentive to him. She sat at his feet as a disciple would sit at the feet of his or her teacher and listened to his word. She was attentive to him as the prophet who had come into their presence. Mary had somehow understood that hospitality is not so much about giving something to a guest but about receiving the guest and accepting from the guest whatever it is that he has to offer. To offer hospitality to someone is to be open to the gift that he or she offers to us.

I'm not sure that I have understood hospitality quite like that. My hospitality usually looks more like Martha's hospitality than Mary's. If I know that someone is coming for a meal I try and think ahead about what they might like. I suppose that is the only practical thing to do. But I know that when I have enjoyed the hospitality of others it is not so much the food that is important, but the conversation. Sure, a little wine loosens the tongue a bit, but it is more than that isn't it. When we are made welcome, we are made welcome as someone who is listened to, as someone whose story is valued, as someone who is accepted as they are. I think that was what was happening in the gospel today. Jesus was made

to feel at home by Martha and Mary, but especially by Mary.

One place of hospitality that we sometimes overlook is the place where we are right now. Every church, every place of worship is meant to be a place of hospitality. Every one of us should feel welcome here. The hospitality of this place is the hospitality that Jesus offers to us first of all. No matter who we are, no matter what we have done, Jesus opens his arms in welcome. He invites us to sit at table with him. He wants to hear our story. He wants us to share with him what has been happening in our lives. He listens intently. He offers us food for the journey ahead. He shares himself with us in the Eucharist.

But the hospitality of Jesus is made real by each one of us. People who gather with us will not know that Jesus makes them welcome if we do not. They will not know that Jesus listens to their prayers unless we listen to them too. How will they know that their story is valued unless we are open to hearing their story and getting to know who they are? Just as we pray that our homes be places of true hospitality may we work to make this place a place where all who come are listened to and valued well. May we accept the gifts that each of us has to offer to one another.