

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Genesis 18:1-10 / Luke 10:38-42)
17.07.2022
Hospitality

Dear brothers and sisters,

Where is God? If we are honest, we have to confess that it happens that all of us ask this question one day or another, if not openly, at least in the secret of our hearts. Where is God? Obviously this is a serious and even a painful question. It reminds us that doubt is part of the spiritual journey. One possible answer to that question among many others is that God is present when we offer hospitality to others.

Today's first reading from the book of Genesis tells us clearly that the practice of hospitality in regard to those who come our way is an opportunity for us to meet with the Lord in their person. Our every meeting can be a source of blessing.

The text begins with these strong words: "The Lord appeared to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him". ...The Lord appeared to Abraham... He saw three men standing near him! At this point, we are given a detailed narrative of the rite of hospitality offered to these three men by Abraham. The consequence is that these three men (God himself, according to the text) promise Abraham that his wife Sarah who is old and barren will give birth to a son in the coming year. This is what happened. The message is clear: When hospitality is offered to someone, even to someone unknown to us, it is given to God and it is a source of blessing in our life. Let us reflect on that statement.

In the chapter 53 of his Rule for monks entitled "The reception of guests", St Benedict writes: "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me". Benedict refers to the scene of the Last Judgment found in Matthew 25 and proposes this to be the reason why hospitality offered is a source of blessing: in Matthew 25 Jesus identifies himself to the stranger. When we receive a stranger, it is Christ we welcome! And we cannot receive Christ without being blessed by his coming to us.

We were created in the image and likeness of God. As a result, when we look at another, we should see a reflection of God in that person; when we serve another, it is God whom we serve. Commenting on this chapter of the Rule, Esther de Waal writes: "If we are really to receive everyone as Christ, that means that we must respect each as made in the image of God and not in the image of ourselves. And this particular piece of idolatry is all too easy". The author means that if we receive others, it is for their sake and not for our own sake; it is to help them to become themselves and not to ask them to become an exact copy of ourselves. Esther de Waal continues: "St Benedict faces us with two very simple questions: When we give hospitality, "do we see Christ in the guest? Does the guest see Christ in us"? There is no escape to that question. Speaking on the same subject, Kathleen Norris comments: "No wriggle room, no way out, no chance to respond to a visitor's demands by saying, in an exasperated tone, 'can't you see we're trying to run a monastery here?' The monk I know who did say that to a guest asking one too many questions about monastic life spent the next day apologizing to her, and the next ten years

telling the story on himself". What is true in monastic life is true also in our family lives, in our places of work or leisure. Do we see Christ in the stranger? Does the stranger see Christ in us?

To receive in our hands, in our heart, in our mind any other human being is always a source of blessing, if we look at them with a regard of faith, if we discern God's presence, God's image in them, but it is not always as simple as that. We have a natural tendency to be self-centred and not to like to be disturbed by others. The fact that others are different from us is a source of fear for us. The unknown, the unfamiliar fills us with fear. But in one way or another, God is present in the stranger who suddenly appears in our lives. Our welcoming others is one of the ways whereby the Lord reveals his existence to us, one of the ways whereby he manifests his presence and his love to us.

In the gospel passage we have just heard, when we see Martha and Mary offering hospitality to Jesus, we discover that there is a double dimension in the practice of hospitality: we give something and we receive something. Martha offers a practical hospitality to Jesus, and Mary receives something from Jesus, her guest. We are called to give to others but also to receive from them. To give is easier than to receive. When we give, we are in charge, we are in control. When we receive, we are not in control, we do not take the initiative, we are vulnerable, and so understandably we can be afraid. Our fear is fear of the unknown... Nevertheless the gospel tells us that it was Mary who had chosen the better part. When we give hospitality, the better part is what we receive from the other. Those who are used to listening to others will tell you that, very often, they receive more than they give to those who come to them awaiting a word of consolation or guidance from them.

Let us ask the Lord to purify the regard we pose upon others so that we may acknowledge his presence in them. May our regard upon each other be more and more a regard of faith! Where is God? God is, among many other places, in the stranger who passes by our way.