

13th Sunday of the Year (A)
(1Kings 4:8-11.14-16 / Matthew 10:37-42)
02.07.2023
To welcome

Today our Gospel reading is punctuated by 8 sentences, each beginning by the word “anyone”: the first 4 sentences are about the primacy of Christ and of the Cross, and the last 4 refer to the practice of hospitality.

At first glance, the link between the 2 parts of our reading is not immediately clear, yet there is a connection between the primacy of Christ and the Cross and the ministry of hospitality.

The first essential aspect is that Jesus identifies himself with his disciples. This identification goes deeper than outside signs of agreement or belonging. By our baptism Christ has put his seal upon our lives, the Trinity itself has made its home within us. So to welcome one another is to put Christ first in our lives, it is to prefer nothing whatsoever to him. The other whom I have to welcome is not only my father, my mother, my child, those I am inclined to love and respect. In no way can we pick and choose those whom we want to welcome, because as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us we could make a mistake and refuse hospitality to angels (cf. 13:2).

The primacy of Christ is at stake here because he comes to us in disguise. He is a God of surprises and, sometimes, it may take time for us to discern Christ's features on the face of a visitor, to hear Christ's message in the words of one who speaks to us.

Here the concept of hospitality embraces more than the material aspect of providing a roof, a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. This material dimension to hospitality is necessary but Christian hospitality is also about opening our hearts and minds to the hopes and expectations of our visitors, to their thoughts and story. Clearly we do not have to agree upon everything; obviously some ideas and expectations need to be challenged and evangelised. Nevertheless everything has to start with the humble act of hospitality and respect, with patience and attention.

In order to understand what Jesus means when he mentions offering a cup of cold water, it is useful to remember that Jesus was talking to men and women who lived in the desert. For them a cup of cold water was a question of life or death. So to welcome somebody is not just about offering him or her a “wee cup of tea” that you can drink anywhere and everywhere... and by the way I have nothing against a “wee cup of tea”. For Jesus, to welcome a visitor is a life-giving movement of the heart. It reveals a deep ethical orientation of life and what it means to be a Christian. Like the cup of cold water, what is given is precious and it has the power to save a life.

Hospitality can sometimes be tough, it may demand an effort from us, a stretching of our mind to new horizons; in the act of hospitality we may be required to go the extra mile (cf. Mt 5:41). We may have the impression that we are being treated like a fool, considered as naïve, that we are wasting our time or our money, yet we have to remember what Jesus says in our Gospel reading: “Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. (...) Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

In French, the word *hôte* means both the one who welcomes (like “host” in English) and the one who is welcomed. It seems to me that, here, the French language can help us to understand that hospitality is not a one-way affaire. As we heard in our first reading, in the

story of the prophet Elisha, those who welcomed were not only givers they also received. Hospitality is for us an occasion to become more what we are called to be, it is an occasion to become more human, more humane. And so to refuse hospitality, to keep the doors of our hearts and minds, the doors of our homes and countries locked and bolted is the best way for us to become inhuman.

Sadly, in 2023, many governments do not consider hospitality as a priority. At the moment the UK government wants to pass a Bill against Illegal Migration. In the House of Lords, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby has declared it as morally unacceptable and many Christian leaders have expressed their concern.

But the problem is not only in politics and in Westminster. We have to begin where we are and we must acknowledge that in our families and Christian communities, there are many missed opportunities when it comes to offering hospitality. Unfortunately there are many people who clearly do not feel welcome in our homes and congregations, because of the way we speak and behave, because of our judgemental attitudes and our political statements.

We have to be careful not to settle into cosy ghettos. Whether we think of our country, our family or our Church, fears are thieves, they hijack relationships and keep us enclosed in bubbles and give us an illusory sense of security.

Hospitality is a courageous way of piercing the bubbles in order to grow in humanity. It is important for us to recover the gentle and kind art of hospitality, an art which does not necessarily require great gestures but simply open hearts.

Last October a document from the General Secretariat of the Synod on synodality declared: “The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process” (*Enlarge the Space of your Tent*, n. 31).

Let us enlarge the space of our hearts so that they may embrace and welcome all our brothers and sisters in humanity and so that our Churches may be places which people think of as places wherein all can experience care and love.