

Encounter

Scripture Genesis 18:1-14

A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and

milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.'

Notes

The graciousness with which Abraham welcomed his guests is a typical cultural practice of the time. The connection between hospitality and the presence of God is shown through the promise and blessing received. Hospitality is expressed here as God's intimate encounter with us, if we allow it. The welcome offered to the stranger enriches us through the encounter – the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah turned their barrenness into fertility.

The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers (3rd century)

“One elder who lived all alone undertook a seventy-week fast, eating only once a week during all that time in order to become more receptive to God. When he was little

more than bone and vapour, he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain Bible passage, but God would not do it. The elder, disappointed by how little his fast had done for him, decided to go ask one of his brothers what the passage meant. The minute he closed the door to his cell, an angel of God appeared to him, saying, “Your seventy-week fast did not bring you one step closer to God, but now that you have humbled yourself enough to go to your brother, God sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage.” Then the angel told the elder what it meant and went away.

I like to think that the elder went on to visit his brother anyway, breaking his fast with him and swapping stories about what a trickster God was. At the very least, most of us need someone to tell our stories to. At a deeper level,





most of us need someone to help us forget ourselves, a little or a lot. The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognise that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith)

The Desert Fathers teach us that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbour as self – to encounter a fellow human not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, convince or control but as someone who can draw you out from your own self. The world's greatest religions have always required communities of people to make them work, but we must remain conscious that the central convictions and values within the community not only keep it together, they can act to keep others out! The practice of encountering the 'other' allows for the possibility that this is one of the faces of God. What we have most in common with each other is not religion but humanity; while religion teaches us that encountering another human is as close to God as I may ever get. The point is not to see through the person to God but to see the person in front of me for who they really are, more than just another person in my story.

The entire ministry of Jesus could be described as loving encounter. The teaching of Jesus was not limited to those who looked, acted or thought like him – no one was dismissed from his circle of concern (Mt 25:34-37). Hospitality is not an optional extra for followers of Jesus, nor is it limited to those with a gift for it. It is an absolute necessity in any community of faith.

Honouring the stranger-guest-host relationship

“Our biblical tradition reveals a God who is love, a God who is hospitality. God creates out of selfless hospitable love, invites a people to be a covenanted guest, and implants within this chosen people a law of hospitality to strangers. Accordingly, Abraham, by being the host to strangers, offers hospitality to God.

Jesus, God's beloved, the one who comes among us as visitor and guest becomes the host who offers the hospitality of acceptance, compassion and forgiveness. He tells stories about extravagant hospitality to people "not like us", to sinners, enemies and those who are ethnically and religiously "other".

For me, this rich spiritual tradition of hospitality and honouring the stranger-guest-host relationship, is a potent challenge to the politics surrounding our treatment of asylum

seekers and refugees. More personally, it challenges my familial, communal and work relationships.

The virtue of hospitality invites me to be host, not only to a person, but to his way of being that persists in being so different from mine. Hospitality invites me to accept an individual and also to respect her universe and her temple of meaning, that is, how she uniquely understands or makes sense of events, relationships and herself.

Hospitable people have richer lives. Indeed, they have more fun! It stands to reason. Horizons are expanded and experiences are multiplied as conversation and story-telling turn strangers into mutual hosts and guests, indeed into sisters and brothers."

Patty Fawcner SGS, The Good Oil November 2018

Questions for reflection

1. Consider the ways in which the hospitality offered by our ministry provides opportunities for deep encounters.
2. What gifts do encounters with 'the other' bring to our lives? To our communities?
3. In what ways do they confront our sense of identity, or challenge our accepted practices?

Closing Prayer

Blessing on meeting a stranger...

With respect
and reverence
that the unknown
between us
might flower
into discovery
and lead us
beyond
the familiar field
blind with the weed
of weariness
and old walls
of habit.

(John O'Donohue, Benedictus)

