

Homily **16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C** (21.7.19)

I love these ancient stories that come to us from pre-history: the whole of the Book of Genesis is full of ancient tribal stories that were passed down by word of mouth and eventually got written down and put together by the editor of the Book of Genesis. And these "primitive people" [I've put that in inverted commas] used techniques unusual to us to preserve powerful insights into the mystery of God.

I don't know whether you noticed that, that text seems all over the place. One minute there's plural, "**three men came**", and then there's "**he said**", and then there's three again. And it ends up at the very end, of course, by saying, "**I will visit you next year**". So what happened to the other two? You know? Strange isn't it?

I can see why the early church fathers looked at this text and meditating on it and concluded that this is a prophecy about the Christian revelation, three persons in one God, the three come but there is only one. It's a very daring assertion, but nevertheless, it's a very powerful one.

But the text contains a lot of subtexts. First of all, it's an emphasis, which was very traditional to somebody like Abraham's tribe, on hospitality - that when strangers come to make them welcome and to go the extra mile. But there's a secondary thing that was a great belief, and it's scattered

throughout the whole of the Old Testament, that if you do show hospitality to strangers, you may be welcoming angels in disguise. And there's another side to it as well, the food becomes not just feeding the strangers, who may have travelled a long way, but sharing something with them of an encounter, opening up oneself and one's home and allowing different peoples to encounter one another at a deeper level.

And Abraham was clearly very sensitive to all these vibes and he senses something special here in these visitors, and he does all this and he gets an encounter and a revelation. Because they've had no children, and they were desperate for children, and he knows he's touched the hem of the garment of God through his messengers. It's very powerful.

When you turn to the Gospel, you could be mistaken, thinking all that's being contradicted with poor Martha. And it's not at all, because they've grown up with that tradition, and Jesus knew that tradition quite well, and he was tired on his journey. We know he did have certain friends where he could call in their house for rest from difficulties in his struggle, and he's come here and Martha is copying Abraham. She's trying to make 10,000 dishes to stuff his face. And show that she cares.

You know, when I was first ordained and I was in the parish of Immaculate Heart of Mary, there were loads of Irish families, and you'd go out visiting and they'd try to give you a three-course dinner on a 15-minute visit, and you used to have to say,

**"Calm down, calm down, I've come to see you, not eat your food."**

And I can feel the feeling of Jesus, of being overwhelmed by this hospitality, and the problem here is that Martha is failing to see the encounter, unlike Abraham. She's more focused on her status and dignity as a host that she's lost sight of the need of Jesus, and indeed that he needs an audience to encounter the word with him.

And so many of the scholars comment on that, that funny phrase,

**"that only a few are needed, Martha, and indeed only one"**, what does that mean? It's as if he's saying,

**"Look, I don't want a big meal, I'm not really hungry, I just want one simple thing to eat. I want to engage you and Mary here."**

And these two texts are very powerful for our faith. You can see now why the church says that this is the table of the word [pointing to the lectern] and that's the table of the sacrament [pointing to the altar]. Because these texts teach us to look in our lives in the ordinary events of life and to be open to encounter. That indeed we can meet people who say something to us, and unless we're open to receive, it could be a message from God. We often need to ponder things that we don't ponder.

I'll give you an example of myself. Many years ago, I have tried hard, you can tell me I've failed, I have tried very hard and I'm conscious of it. Somebody once said to me when I was in my full swing,

**"The trouble with you is you don't have a gate on your mouth."**

And I thought about it and went away and it's true, I don't, I say often the first thing that comes into my head. But nowadays, before I say the first thing that comes into my head, I think for two seconds and think,

**"Oh, I'm going to say it anyway."**

[laughter]

You know. But we do need to hear things and see that God in the ordinary can be encountering us and that indeed in hospitality and in strangers there may an angel visiting us. And when we're open to that in everyday life, we bring that to church, and in bringing that openness that God might be revealing truths, not just about me but about life, in everyday life, then when we bring it here to the table of the word and the table of the sacrament and they come much more alive. We can see how these feed us for another week, because we may have engaged the Word of God today - there have been many of the saints, most of the saints, if you read their biographies, autobiographies, they talk about coming to church and hearing a single line in the Scripture, and they went away and they knew it was for them, that day.

But they could only do that because they were open to revelation in everyday life. And being touched by the sacrament, you know, you can't be on a high every week, but some weeks, maybe. We go back to the bench to pray and we really feel the presence of Jesus who has come to us in this humble form.