

Sunday 16

Two of our readings today, the first from Genesis and the second from the Gospel of Luke, speak of hospitality. But it is not ordinary hospitality. Abraham is entertaining three men, but they are God in disguise, and Martha and Mary are entertaining the Lord Jesus. We practice ordinary hospitality when we entertain each other. But to entertain God is another matter. Or is it? Could it be that the lesson which these readings wish to teach us is that when we entertain each other, we are also entertaining God himself?

That is not just a crazy thought. No, it is the lesson which our faith teaches us over and over again. Jesus tells us that we cannot love God unless we love our neighbor. But if the love of God cannot be separated from the love of neighbor, that must mean that God and the neighbor are inseparable. We recognize the truth of this belief in our own lives when we feel guilty after having mistreated another human being. We know instinctively that we have offended God in offending this other person.

This same belief is present in today's second reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians. This is a difficult passage. The author

piles words upon words and clauses upon clauses until we are ready to throw up our hands in frustration and say to him: Get to the point. What is your point? And then he finally says it: The mystery I am talking about which has now been revealed is that Christ is in you! Of course he is speaking to Gentiles and trying to teach them that God, Jesus, is just as present in them as he is in the chosen people, the Jews.

So we should be aware of the fact that in meeting and dealing with each other, we are meeting and dealing with God, with Jesus. And that is especially true when we receive each other in hospitality. “Hospes venit, Christus venit” (“A guest comes, Christ comes”) was a saying which the monks of the middle ages etched on the walls of their dining rooms, their refectories, so as to remind themselves of how they should behave when the bell rang one more time. I suppose they often felt the way someone who has a summer home feels in the middle of July: “Oh, no, another guest!” But it is Christ.

But today’s Gospel teaches us a more subtle form of hospitality. Martha is running around making all the necessary preparations to serve her special guest a good meal, but her sister Mary is just

sitting there listening to Jesus. And yet when she complains to the Lord (Tell her to help me) Jesus tells her that Mary has chosen the better part, the one thing necessary, and that it will not be taken from her. Even if we did everything possible to offer our guests a great meal but did not at some point sit down to talk to them, to listen to them, what would they feel like? They would feel that we were offering them things but not ourselves, not our friendship. Mary offers Jesus a special kind of hospitality, that of friendship, love and discipleship, and that, Jesus tells us, is the best kind, indeed, in the end, the only kind of hospitality we can offer him.

The service of the Lord in and through the service of others is true Christian love and living. But it must be based on our listening with attention to the Lord, learning from him. In our new age when some of us are never alone but almost always in contact with someone via cell phone or e-mail, it takes great effort to put away all these gadgets and just sit quietly before the Lord in prayer. But we must do that. It is the one thing necessary, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel. If we don't do that, we have not offered him the kind of hospitality he wants of us, that of the disciple who listens to him.