

Hospitality

Genesis 18: 1-15

The doorbell rings. A group of three people you've never met are standing on the doorstep. What do you do?

Who are they? What do they want? How do you know they are who they say they are? Where are their credentials?

Would you open up the door to them at all?

Our reading from Genesis offers us a striking picture of ancient Near-Eastern hospitality. It is a hot, slow afternoon by the big trees at Mamre. Imagine the haze rising from the ground and the sound of the cicadas. Abraham is settled outside his tent, possibly enjoying a little shade and some breeze to cool himself. This is not the time of day for people to be wandering about.

However, when Abraham sees three men standing nearby, he rushes over to see them and bows in front of them. He doesn't ask who they are or what their business might be, but instinctively offers deep respect and love. He offers water to clean their dusty feet, a shady spot to rest and offers to make them food.

The food he asks to be set before the men isn't just leftovers, but freshly-made and at some expense. He uses 23 litres of finest flour to make bread, and picks a "choice, tender calf" to create a special dish for his guests.

He has no way of knowing what will be the result of his generosity, but lavishes great attention on them. Whilst they enjoy their meal, he stands silently and attentively near them in the shade of a tree. It is they who speak to him, asking to see his wife, Sarah.

Perhaps Abraham thought they wanted to thank her for preparing the meal, but the promise made to him and Sarah is far more amazing. This older couple do not see themselves as future parents; Sarah laughs at the prospect of being a mother when she is beyond her childbearing years.

Abraham had no idea that he was entertaining angels. Some people have interpreted those three men as the three persons of the Trinity; after all, verses 10 and 13 describe the speaker as "the Lord". Whether angels or God himself, Abraham has come into contact with the Divine, and his hospitality is rewarded with a promise of great things to come.

Whilst we must be rightly cautious about strangers at our door today, how can we make acts of hospitality a part of our culture?

Are our hearts places of hospitality? We have seen much unrest and examples of great hostility in the news as anger against the treatment of black and people from ethnic minorities has overflowed. There is a need for each of us to reflect on our own unconscious bias and the way that we respond to others. Are our instincts as respectful and loving as Abraham's? How well do we listen? Is our welcome only for those who seem "like us"?

Is our church a place of hospitality? We have heard the news in the last week that places of worship can begin to reopen for private prayer. Here at All Saints, we are making preparations to open our doors to people for quiet reflection and prayer very soon. Hospitality has to mean ensuring that we offer a place of safety and welcome.



The picture with this reflection, Rublev's Icon¹, gives us a wonderful image of hospitality. Take some time to look at it closely. You will see the white walls of a town and some tall trees in the background. You will also see that there are three people seated at a table in the foreground. Here is Mamre, and the three visitors who came to Abraham.

Look at the way in which the three visitors are sitting. Although they are close together, their eyes focused on one another as they form a semicircle round the table, this is not a closed group. Notice the feet of the two angels on the right and left, gesturing towards an empty space. The angel of the left also points towards the same space. Draw into that space and sit with them.

This is true hospitality: being drawn into a circle of love from all the turmoil and stress in the world around us. This is the circle which God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit invites everyone. May we be always helping to widen that circle of hospitality in our lives.

¹ By Andrei Rublev - From here., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=54421>

Collect for the First Sunday after Trinity

God of truth,
help us to keep your law of love
and to walk in ways of wisdom,
that we may find true life
in Jesus Christ your Son.
Amen.

Rev'd Vicky Barrett