

When I read through today's passage earlier this week I was stuck by the outrageously generous hospitality offered by Abraham and how hospitality and invitation are core elements of our faith.

Hospitality was highly valued in Abraham's culture and I can image Abraham sitting comfortably outside his tent when he looks up and suddenly there are three men standing there. Abraham doesn't hesitate – he knows what's expected of him – to make the travelers comfortable by offering them water for drinking and washing, a shady spot to rest and something to eat. I mean, it's not as if he's expecting God to drop in for lunch, is it?

But that's exactly what has happened as the text makes clear. God and two angels, in fact. The big theophany debate – that's the posh technical word for an appearance of God - is whether 'Lord' is God the Father or the second person of the Trinity – Jesus. What can we glean from the text? Well, there's God taking on a human form; there's foot washing; there's conversation whilst eating and there's a promise made. My vote goes for Jesus. Even if I'm wrong it still means God was descending to meet with humans long before Mary gave birth to the infant Jesus.

There's also some other interesting insights revealed:

- Sarah takes charge of the bread baking and the amount she makes, according to every authority I read was sufficient to feed well more than 133, never mind 3 men. That's being extravagantly generous.
- Abraham has a good calf slaughtered when in that time and place, most meals would have been meatless with meat being reserved for very special occasion, not when strangers stop by. A chicken or small lamb would have been more than sufficient to feed 3 people whereas a calf would feed dozens. That's extravagant generosity.

Such extravagance reminded me of the times in Uganda when Jane and I as part of a Tearfund group were offered lunch in remote villages. OK, the villagers knew we were coming, but their hospitality was overwhelming generous as they insisted we take the most comfortable seats in the shadiest spot; we were served a choice of meats when normally the villages only eat one type of meat and then only on special occasions.

Like Abraham they were the perfect host. Unlike Abraham who was a very rich man they were desperately poor, yet they delighted in serving us the equivalent of a Christmas feast with a great smile on their faces. I don't think they were thinking of Hebrews 13: 2 “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it”. At least, I know I didn't have shiny wings and a halo.

There are other intriguing aspects about the invitation and hospitality too.

As the leader of his tribe, Abraham's tent would have been situated so that he had a clear view of any visitors approaching. The fact these three men suddenly appear standing near to him suggest that this is some sort of special visitation. The text does not make it clear. But I have in my mind the same sort of scene as the two travelers walking on the road to Emmaus and are suddenly and unexpectedly joined by a stranger and they insist he stays to eat with them.

Also, Abraham serves the men himself and stands nearby whilst they eat, taking on the role of a servant. This is the man, remember, who is head of his tribe and has any number of servants at his beck and call yet he humbles himself to serve others and my mind is brought back once more to the last supper.

Abraham also instructs Sarah to specifically use fine flour, not the everyday run of the mill flour. That brings to mind the bread served at Holy Communion because under Canon B17 - the Church of England rules - only bread made from the best and purest wheat flour should be used. Think Christmas Eve midnight service with the bread machine pinging in the middle of the service letting everyone know, the bread has been baked and knowing Jon as I do, only the finest, purest and best of flour would have been used.

Finally, there is the fact that although Abraham and Sarah could have called on any number of servants, they actually took the lead roles and I don't know about you but I always find there is something special about being invited to eat in other people's homes when they have done all the preparation, cooking and serving themselves. I think the most memorable meal I've ever eaten – and believe me I've eaten in some superb 3 Michelin starred restaurants – was at a friend's house a couple of years ago when we went for what we thought was going to be a simple Sunday lunch.

Every single part of the four course lunch had been prepared by our hosts, cooked to perfection, served without pretension and instead of the slice of Chicken or lamb which I had anticipated, we were served with a huge chateaubriand – fillet steak cooked to perfection. That was without doubt the equivalent of Abraham serving the choice, tender calf to his guests. Extravagant generosity.

I think the perfect host is the one who says, as each guest arrives, “I'm so glad *you* were able to join us” and when each person leaves, asks, “Must you leave so soon?” and you feel that the host genuinely means it. Abraham wanted to make the three travelers feel genuinely welcome and this reminded me of my friends who who had travelled, some for hundreds of miles, to attend my ordination here last December. Without exception, every single one wrote or called afterwards to say how they were bowled over by the genuine warmth of the welcome they received and the extravagantly generous food and wine which was provided. Most of them were not church goers and whilst our lovely church family were simply living out and sharing God's grace and generosity my friends were blown away. One actually said “If I knew my local church was like this then I'd be there every week”

The bible often pictures the kingdom of heaven as a generous, extravagant banquet. Hospitality is integral to our faith and fosters closer relationships, and Abraham and Sarah's hospitality provides an early biblical insight to the way relationships and sharing a meal go hand in hand. Whether that is through the generosity of Abraham, the invitation to the traveler on the Emmaus road or the genuine welcome and hospitality offered to friends and strangers alike we are only able to do it only through the amazing grace of God.

Cue for a song, I think.

