

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 5th Sunday after Trinity

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All Saints' Marseille

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If you think multi-tasking, that is, one's skill to deal with more than one task at the same time, is an invention of the 21st century, you are wrong. Today's Gospel reading brings proof that there is nothing new under the sun.

I suppose I am not the only one to get distracted by the many tasks which are to be performed. I am surely not the only one 'to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of anxiety' (*Ps 127.3*). Very often, I feel I am left on my own to fight many battles at one time.

I can definitely feel sympathy for and solidarity with Martha.

Nevertheless, I must admit Martha is a little intimidating: strong and assertive, she has an agenda and wants others to walk at her pace. God himself should comply with it: 'Lord, she says, do you not care that the work is just pouring out of me, while my sister Mary is so heavenly minded, that she is of no earthly good? Tell her to get on her feet and help me.'

Even the provençal tradition depicts her as a 'maîtresse femme', capable, determined, with authority; after landing with her family somewhere west of Marseille, she marched to where the town of Tarascon is today, and made it her job to tame the local monster, the Tarasque.

Martha is always in charge. And probably expects recognition for her being worried by so many things, for doing so much good in so many directions.

Jesus and his disciples are in her house and she is acting out hospitality, as the head of the household was supposed to do – remember Abraham running to organise the welcoming of the three visitors.

But, Martha, Martha, there is need of only one thing! And your sister Mary, in her quiet posture of attentiveness, seems to have sensed it.

One can only wonder what this one thing which Martha's hospitality lacks might be. It is rather intriguing that her laying out the feast of welcome for Jesus Christ is not recorded as matching Abraham's hospitality. What is so commendable about him? After all, he only gave the orders, and his servants and wife Sarah sprang into action.

In Abraham and Martha's ancient world, hospitality was a sacred duty, recorded in all cultures and religions. Extending hospitality to travellers was an absolute requirement, with a sense that both host and guest enter God's presence. Have things changed over the centuries? They certainly have in the Western world.

In our age of multiple displacements and terror, our sense of hospitality has been shaped by fears, traumas, individualism, and also by an obsession with efficiency.

We are rather cautious about whom we let into our homes, into our communities, into our countries, into our lives. We'd rather extend hospitality towards those of the same social, cultural, economic, political, ethnic kind. Even Christian communities are not immune and try to protect themselves from the unsettling world that might knock at their door.

We want to set limitations on who is welcome, and when they are welcome. We want to retain mastery and control. The guest has to play by our rules and to adhere to our agenda.

In this, I can see the heritage of the 18th c. German philosopher Immanuel Kant. For him, hospitality should be contractual by nature, stem from self-interest and follow some very clear rules. This does not leave much space for the guest to unfold their authentic self, to surprise the host, to bring good news of abundant new life, as it happens in Abraham's story.

You might be acquainted with the nature of the French word 'hôte' – it means both the one who gives and the one who receives hospitality. It describes so well the reversal of situation that Abraham allows: his own space becomes his guests' place. Abraham sits at their feet, hangs on their words, and so he becomes a guest himself.

Before this encounter by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham, as a poor wayfaring stranger, has been welcomed and surely also rejected during his journey. I am rather certain this has shaped his sense of hospitality – the hospitality which is a mystery that has its source in God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who is both Guest and Host.

Christ stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to allow his hospitality to enfold us: “If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (*Revelation 3.20*)

Two French-Jewish philosophers, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida, one born in Lithuania, the other in Algeria, both having made traumatic displacements in their lives, in the dramatic circumstances of the 20th c., were advocates of a very radical and unconditional hospitality, akin to Abraham’s – a hospitality that requires from the host to give up their mastery and control, and so allow the guest to disrupt and disturb their well-practised arrangements and surely to challenge their patterns of thinking.

To practice this radical and unconditional hospitality needs a leap of faith, perhaps even a touch of madness.

Martha, even if she has recognised God’s visitation, is too much in control, too obsessed with perfection, to easily enter this mystery of hospitality.

She needs to let go of her agenda, of her busyness, of her space and time, to accept to be vulnerable, to be still, to ask herself for hospitality – and so become centred on God.

People who like to listen, people who like to serve, people who always know better, people who are shy, people who want to be leaders, people whose voices are not heard, people who think they are barren, and their life is fruitless - they are all visited by God, with the same depth of concern and compassion.

May God, who is the source of all hospitality, who is both Host and Guest, open our eyes to see in those whose lives and faith journeys bring to our door – to see in them his visitation. May he inspire us to make room for the hope they bring, to enter their hospitality. May he teach us the boldness and the humility to say to those unhopd-for guests: Abide with us! Amen.