

**This Sunday's Readings – the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – Hospitality appears to be the theme of today's readings, but as we shall see it is not the only message.

In the first reading from the Book of Genesis (the first book of the bible), Abraham is visited by Yahweh in the form of three men. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this comment on ancient travel – “It's next to impossible for someone in our middle class American culture to appreciate the "iffiness" of travel in 18th century B.C.E. Canaan. No interstate highway system, no fast food outlets or secure hotels, no safe transportation options, not even a reliable police force. Travelers had to depend on the hospitality of strangers. Without being able to fall back on such generosity, travel was almost impossible”. Of course Abraham does not know that he is being visited by Yahweh. Hospitality was and still is extremely important in the Middle East and Abraham is the perfect host. Abraham greets the three men and opens his home to them. He provides them with food and drink and a place to rest before they continue their journey. Note that Sarah, Abraham's wife, remains in the tent even after the three men inquire about her. Before they leave, one of the three states that in a year's time, Sarah will bear a son. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this comment – “The sacred author's message is to the point: since you never can be certain who the person is to whom you show hospitality, you'd best treat him or her as would the most important person you could ever imagine entering your life. In this case, the three turn out to be Yahweh in human form. (They're three, not because of the later doctrine of the Trinity, but because no one person or image can totally convey Yahweh's "otherness.") The reward for the couple's generosity is a son. In this period, before the faithful understood they could look forward to an eternal afterlife, the only way people could be confident they'd live on after this life was to have children, who would keep their parents' memory alive”. This was miraculous as Abraham and Sarah had no children and both were advanced in age. The son would be Isaac who Abraham would be told to sacrifice to prove his obedience to God. This is a prefiguring of Jesus sacrifice to save all of us. This reading really marks the beginning of salvific history. As a side note, the terebinth was a small Mediterranean tree that was a source of tanning material and turpentine. Mamre was believed to be located near Hebron, 20 miles Southwest of Jerusalem.

The Gospel reading from Luke also involves hospitality. Remember that Jesus is still on His journey to Jerusalem. This event occurs right after the story about the Good Samaritan. On the way He stops at the house of Martha and her sister Mary. Martha immediately begins preparing food and drink for Jesus just as Abraham in the first reading did the same for the three men (God). Mary on the other hand chooses to sit at Jesus feet and listen to Him while Martha is slaving away in the kitchen. Martha became so wrapped up in the tradition of providing hospitality that she wound up ignoring the guest! She complains to Jesus but Jesus gently tells her not to get so wrapped up in anxiety. It is better to provide a small meal and listen to their special guest (Jesus) than it is to spend all the time in the kitchen and missing Jesus saving words. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column further explains the connection with today's first reading – “Martha and Mary's hospitality to Jesus on his Lucan journey to Jerusalem parallels Abraham and Sarah's welcoming of the three strangers. But the reward in this situation

isn't a child; it's the life Jesus shares with those who are open to him. This reward comes not just because someone (like Martha) offers a place to stay and food to eat, but also because (like Mary) we sit at Jesus' feet and listen to his message. In the long run, just as Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac guarantees his parents will live on, so by listening to Jesus' words and carrying them out, we receive eternal life, beginning right here and now”.

In today's Gospel reading, we have a cultural problem, which is Jesus teaching a woman in public. So what's the problem? John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* explains – “. . . Perhaps the most stunning cultural element in the story is that Jesus appears to be teaching a woman. First of all, someone is out of place. In the gender-based division of space in this culture, it is very likely Mary who is sitting with Jesus in an area reserved for men (whether dining area or “livingroom” area). Second, even though Jesus may be breaking cultural rules by teaching Mary, she appears to be passive listener. She never is reported to teach in her turn or take up a ministry later. Third, since Jesus interacts with Mary here and in John 11, Malina suggests that Martha might have been the younger sister. In the Mediterranean cultural perspective on human activity men are expected to be spontaneous, to react to the challenge, opportunity, or invitation of the moment (see Luke 7:31-35). Women are expected to work, achieve, to be involved in purposeful activity. When men are healed in Luke, they respond spontaneously and run out to spread the word. When Simon's mother-in-law is healed, her first response is the measured activity of serving a meal. Jesus' positive judgment that “Mary has chosen the good part” and his gentle reminder to Martha for being “worried and distracted about many things” fits into Jesus' customary, counter-structural positions. He frequently takes his culture's second-choice options for either gender, in this case “spontaneous” behavior among women, and urges it as a good alternative to the first choice (“achievement”). For men, he regularly urges that they who hold spontaneity as their primary activity look instead to methodical and thoughtful “doing” of the will of God, “keeping” the commandments, and so on. According to Luke's Jesus, when there is a choice between extending steadfast loving kindness (Martha) and listening to the word of God (Mary), the latter is preferable”.

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