

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(2 Kings 4:8-11,14-16a / Matthew 10:37-42)
02.07.2017

A key of entry into today's gospel passage is given to us by our first reading. I think it fair to say that the experience of the host couple in 2 Kings 4 demonstrates for us that the hospitality we afford to others has the potential of becoming for us, as it did for them, a life-giving grace – a blessing far beyond anything we had intended, imagined or hoped for ourselves.

God-given life was the Lord's recompense to this childless couple for the kindness they showed to His prophet, Elisha whom He had sent their way.

So too, when we open our hearts to receive the Lord's coming to us in and through others, He recompenses us in extraordinary ways. We experience the truth of the well-known Christian saying: *It is in giving that we receive.*

The story of the blessing of the couple of Shuenem is not the first of its kind in the Bible. One thinks, for example, of the story concerning Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, where these, our parents in the faith were told that they would conceive a child by God's grace – a child, through whom God's promise for His people would be fulfilled.

Genesis 18 presents the conception of Isaac as God's extraordinary reward for the hospitality Abraham and Sarah afforded to the three strangers who had passed by their way.

The wonderful event at Mamre is alluded to in the Epistle to the Hebrews in a text advocating the practice of Christian hospitality. In Hebrews 13 we read: *Without recognising it, offering hospitality to others, some have welcomed angels sent by God.*

St Benedict is inspired by this insight in his *Rule for Monks*. We find the epistle to the Hebrews quoted in his chapter, *On the reception of guests*.

In this chapter, St Benedict insists that *we should see Christ in every person who comes to our door.*

In his teaching on hospitality, it strikes me that St Benedict likewise, has in mind the manner in which the Risen Christ manifested Himself to the Emmaus pilgrims. It was as they listened to the Scriptures together with their guest and shared table fellowship with Him that the disciples were blessed to recognise the One beside them to be none other than the Risen Lord.

For Benedict the experience of listening to the Scriptures together with guests and of sharing table fellowship with them is all-important. He sees these elements as central to the practice of monastic hospitality.

Yet another scriptural text underlies Benedict's understanding of the importance of practising

hospitality.

His *Rule for Monks* is also clearly influenced by the Last Judgment scene of Matthew 25 – a teaching already hinted at in today's gospel passage from Matthew 10 with the remark: *Anyone who gives so much as a cup of cold water will be rewarded for their kindness.*

If the Rule would have us understand that Christ is to be discerned and honoured in every person we encounter, it is stressed that He should be recognised to be all the more present in the poor and needy. For Benedict, such people are to be considered privileged guests, for it is under their guise that Christ comes to us in a special way.

The Rule insists above all that those who come to the monastery should be received *with all the warmth of love*. Then, Benedict goes on to say: *Guests should be welcomed with all humility and with all humanity.*

The warmth of love. Humility. Humanity.

These attitudes all point to reverence and respect for others; they speak to us of the honour, which is due to Christ who is to be recognised in every person who comes our way.

Humility and humanity are the fruits of a true experience of meeting with Christ. They manifest whether or not our experience is authentic.

Benedict insists upon the virtue of humility throughout his Rule for Monks. In the chapter *On the reception of Guests* he stresses that *monks should be careful not to succumb to the temptation of pride* in the hospitality they offer.

St Benedict would have his monks remember that they are never to put themselves on a pedestal. He reminds them that they are to receive guests into their midst from a humble stance and with due reverence. Quite literally, Benedict instructs the monk who welcomes guests to advance towards them *with head inclined as a sign of humble reverence in regard to the One – Christ – who comes in and through their person.*

Benedict's insistence upon humility in the practice of hospitality echoes that of St Augustine of Hippo who writes to his brothers: *We should not only practise hospitality, but also learn humility from Christ... For, humility is the perfect foundation of hospitality.*(*Ad fratres in eremo s.46*)

If our hospitality is genuine, then it will be humble and because it is humble it will be experienced as full of humanity – so full of humanity, in fact, that it will have a God-like quality to it – the Godlike quality of God's true Servant, the One who alone was fully man: Jesus Christ.

We must remember that it is always the Lord Himself who welcomes those who come into His

house. He does this in and through those he sets up as guardians of His household, that's to say, in and through ordinary people like each of us who are called to reflect Him to others.

Let us never forget that what we are all are called to disclose to others is nothing less than the Lord's own graciousness.

It is striking in the Rule to see how, in the unfolding of the routine of welcoming guests, in a well adjusted balance, Benedict manages to hold together the spiritual and material dimensions of hospitality.

We read: *After the invitation to pray, the Scriptures are to be read for the guests' instruction and then, with this accomplished, let every kindness be shown to them.*

The approach Benedict would have us reflect to those who come our way is a truly holistic one.

Let's ponder for a moment one little phrase he uses: *every kindness*.

The Latin word translated by the expression *every kindness* is *humanitas*. In the Latin contemporary with St Benedict's composition of the Rule this word often referred to a meal.

Interestingly, from the perspective of today's first reading, Benedict speaks in the same section of the Rule about the importance of providing proper bedding to guests.

Clearly, Benedict insists that guests be afforded every comfort they need.

Did the Shuenemite woman not make sure that Elisha had food to eat and a bed in which to sleep?

More than that, she made sure that the man of God was provided with a table and chair and lamp.

Her concern for Elisha bears testimony to and reflects *humanitas – every kindness; all care and consideration*.

To conclude, let me come back to something which I believe to be essential to Benedictine hospitality. Namely, that in offering welcome to others we receive life from God through their coming to us

There is an incident from St Benedict's life, which illustrates this beautifully.

Benedict's biographer – St Gregory the Great – tells us how the young Benedict in the fervour of his early years, lived as a hermit. He was so cut off from others during this period spent in the solitude of Subiaco that he ignored the dates of the calendar – including those of the liturgical cycle. Because of this, he was unaware one year that it was Easter Day. To mark the feast the Lord put the idea into the heart of a priest to bring food to him and to offer him company to celebrate the great Easter festival. The story recounts how when the priest announced to Benedict that it was Easter Day and this was the reason why he had come to see him, Benedict exclaimed in reply: *Yes, indeed, it is Easter, Father, for this reason: because I have the joy of seeing you, because you are here!*

So we are called to see and honour the Risen Christ in all those we meet ... in every person to whom we are called – let me insist, to whom we are graced – to offer hospitality.