

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Genesis 18:1-10 / Luke 10:38-42)
17.07.2016
Hospitality

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” (Jn 1:10-11)

These verses taken from the Prologue of St John’s Gospel explain in the simplest way why everything went wrong in the relationship between Jesus and his people.

It seems to me that the simplicity of the statement makes it all the more damning: they just did not recognize Jesus, they did not welcome the One they were longing for because they did not recognize him.

Jesus is aware of the misunderstanding that led to this and in so many of his parables he tries to warn his people that while he does not coincide with what they are expecting, in truth he is their long awaited Lord.

In St Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus rebukes those disciples who are unable to see him in the poor, in those who hunger and thirst, in those who are in prison. To St Paul who is puzzled by the question: “Why do you persecute me?”, the Lord declares: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Ac 9:4-5).

Like the Jews in Jesus’ time, the challenge for us today is to recognize the Lord and to welcome him in all those whom we meet.

Obviously we are all ready to welcome the Lord if he comes according to our image and likeness, if he fits an ideal image of ourselves. In this part of the world, for some, he would have to be white, anti-European, slightly self-centred and inward looking.

To be willing to welcome Christ implies that we are ready to be challenged. Christ cannot fit the image we have of him. He is greater than all we can ask or imagine.

If Christ identifies himself with a Samaritan, an outcast and heretic in Jewish society, then surely he identifies himself with all men and women we can meet in our daily lives.

However the greatest challenge of Christian hospitality lies in what the 2nd Vatican Council calls “the exchange of gifts” (LG 13). To welcome somebody is not only about giving him or her what he or she needs, it is also about receiving from him or her what he or she has to offer. The journey we have to undertake is a journey from the gratification we get, when we give, to the humility we experience, when we receive. It is humbling to acknowledge that we need something from others, and yet this humility is the distinctive mark of the Christian disciple.

Maybe this is the aspect which is most lacking in Martha’s attitude. She seems to be so focused on what she wants to give, and there is no doubt that she is eager to give what is best to Jesus, that she is no longer able to receive what he wants to give her. On the contrary, Mary gives Jesus her time and her attention and, at the end, she receives the better part.

Our Christian vocation spurs us on to resist the spirit of fear and self-sufficiency which can be so prevalent in our hearts, in our society and in our Churches. We have seen it powerfully at work during the Brexit campaign.

Fears and self-sufficiency build walls, are obsessed with security, they prevent dialogue and mutual enrichment, and they promote individualism. Do we really want our communities to be built on such foundations?

Yes we can justify our fears, find many good reasons for being afraid of strangers, we

can welcome only those who are like us and who think and worship as we do, we can believe or make ourselves believe that we can do better on our own, that we need nobody other than ourselves in order to be great again.

However we must not forget that interdependence is an essential component of Christian life. None of us can follow Christ on his or her own. We live and we grow in humanity and in faith not by excluding one another, not by asserting ourselves over another, but by welcoming one another with reverence and grace.

The exchange of gifts which is at the heart of hospitality is not a commercial transaction, it is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes it “to receive each other’s benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Life...*).

Like Abraham and Sarah, we do not know beforehand who God is going to use to bless us and what is the blessing about. In the practice of hospitality, we are not in control, we just consent to be God’s means for the blessing of the world.

With Pope Francis we pray that each one of us in our families, communities and countries may face all the challenges of life “not with the logic of indifference but with the logic of hospitality and sharing, in order to protect and promote the dignity and centrality of every human being” (*Message*, 23.06.2014).

What is at stake here is really the dignity of every human being, how we respect each person and all people. While many of our contemporaries fear, shun and demonize whoever is different or challenging, as Christians we are sent to proclaim a Gospel of respect, inclusion, encouragement and hospitality.

It is appropriate to conclude with St Benedict’s words, they should guide us in the way we relate to those we meet and know, and those we do not know: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Mt 25:35)” (*RB* 53:1)