

***'Harvest of Hospitality'***

For the second week running, we have readings from the Old Testament (OT) and Luke's gospel that speak as one. Last week, the focus was on 'loving thy neighbor as thyself', the so-called Golden Rule. In Deuteronomy, Moses had told the people that loving their neighbor should come as naturally as breathing. In Luke, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which loving a stranger who had been beaten up and robbed came spontaneously from only one of several passers by; furthermore, that 'someone' from whom compassion was least expected, looked down upon by faithful Jews because he didn't share their religious views.

The pairing this week shows a particular way of 'Loving Your Neighbour' - by offering hospitality - but there is no hint of violence. Genesis 18 (v1-10) backs up the need to be compassionate with a story in which the central figure was none less than Abraham, legendary father of the nation. Today's equivalent might be the Queen, visiting that hospice in Windsor last week on a cool day to encourage staff and residents: her doctors would probably not have allowed her to make such a journey this week in the current heatwave! It was a hot day in the Genesis story and Abraham was trying to cool down at the entrance to his tent when he sees three strangers approach. He could, like the priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan parable, have let them pass by his tent by on the other side. Instead, he runs to meet them and bows to show he comes as a friend and would-be servant. Then, he goes out of his way to prepare a 'Sunday roast', dressing the calf himself and getting his wife Sarah to do some home baking. Without warning the three suddenly become one, no less than God himself, who promises Abraham that, despite Sarah being considered far too old to have children, she will bear him a son. Sarah was not in on the deal but overhears and can't help laughing at the impossibility.

The story reminds me a little of the pantomime scene in which the heroine goes to the aid of a frail old lady, gathering sticks in the woods,

who turns into a Fairy Godmother. The story can be taken literally, at face value, as evidence that God can intervene in our lives and perform miracles when we do the right thing

It can also be read as a parable rather – like the ‘Good Samaritan’ - and, to me, has a far more powerful message, read that way, showing the power and fruits of hospitality. God was present in the three strangers who approached Abraham’s tent, as he is in all the strangers that we come across. Abraham doesn’t know them from Adam, but he instinctively forgets his own and his family’s needs and thinks of the needs of weary, hot and hungry travellers. Having experienced the joy of giving themselves to others, Abraham and Sarah giving themselves to each other, and the rest, as they say WAS history.

In the south of our country at this very moment, there will be fathers sitting in the doors of tents or rustling up a Bar-B-Q, having got away for a well-earned break, or relaxing at home; there will be wives preparing picnics or trying to keep cool in their kitchens, while eyes in the back of heads watch that children don’t get sunburnt. Yet some will also take time to keep a watchful eye out for young mums, unprotected kids, elderly neighbours or even strangers, who are finding the heat too much for them. Forgetting their own needs for a while, they will tend to the vulnerable and they will be blessed.

Our Gospel from Luke 10, v38-42, is another story about hospitality but this time those coming together are presumably not strangers. Jesus and his friends are on the road and drop in without warning on the sisters Martha and Mary. Unless Mary was being outrageously forward, the group had dropped by before and were no strangers. Martha instinctively worries about the state of the house and what they will give the visitors to eat (we’ve all seen that response, at least a 100x before!). Mary just wants to pick up the traces, hear the latest from her boyfriend and build the friendship. It takes all sorts.

I think we are often too quick to pass judgement when we hear this story and place the devotion of Mary above the pragmatism of Martha, subconsciously excusing ourselves for occasions when we let others do the donkey-work.

Note that Jesus does not criticize Martha but tries to calm her; I suspect this is the only place in the bible, where there is a double-take on a name: 'Martha, Martha---' he says. We can imagine the arm round the shoulder, the soft, slow intonation in his voice. Her care and hospitality are welcome but so is the affection of Mary: they are different but necessary parts of hospitality. Like loving God and our neighbour, it's another 'both and' situation. Love springs spontaneously from the heart but does not dodge responsibility. How often have we marveled at the speed at which the table is cleared, and dishes are washed after church fellowship meals or clan gatherings.

The paired readings from Luke and Genesis remind us of the untapped power and fruits of hospitality. The care and affection which we show amongst family and friends is not just a miraculous gift from God- its the presence and essence of the divine in our communities. The divine can come in the guise of strangers, as it did in the story of Abraham. Exciting things happen when churches leave their tents and lay down their resources in service to neighbours in their communities. This is a 'good part' of being Christian and we need to do more of it!

Neville

