

Sermon : the Fifth Sunday after Trinity, July 20<sup>th</sup> 2025



## **The Three Tables**

### **Genesis 18. 1 - 10**

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup>He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup>Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup>Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' <sup>6</sup>And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' <sup>7</sup>Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' <sup>10</sup>Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.'

### **Luke 10. 38 - 42**

Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by her

many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.'<sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

The Table of hospitality of Abraham and Sarah; the table of the eucharist, and the table of Mary and Martha

I wonder if you can see the connection between the Old Testament reading today and the Gospel ? I think it is an interesting conjunction between these two readings, so I would like to explore that further with you.

The reading from Genesis is one of the most mysterious, perhaps even mystic, passages in the Old Testament. Who are these three visitors, who sometimes speak as three, and sometimes as one person. They seem to appear out of nowhere.

Abraham rises to the occasion and with Sarah provides them with lavish Bedouin hospitality, not counting the cost. But it is interesting that this passage has come to be known as "The hospitality of Abraham" - surely it should rather be known as the hospitality of Abraham and Sara, and it is Sara who does the work of providing the meal, and receives the final blessing of the story - the overwhelming blessing of the promise of a son to one who might well have given up all hope of having a son of her own. And yet Abraham is so busy with his guests that Sara seems to have been rather overlooked. Until the strange visitors ask him "where is your wife Sara " ? And Abraham replies, "there in the tent " - no doubt busy with the tasks of clearing up after the meal.

And so while Abraham ostensibly provides the hospitality, relying upon Sara, it is Sara herself who receives the blessing at the end of this story. But let's just remember as well that there is one woman around the tent who is more neglected, even forgotten by Abraham, than Sara - and that is Hagar the Egyptian , the unmentioned one, who has already provided Abraham with the gift of a son, Ishmael. They have their own subsequent history which takes off in its own particular direction.

Well now, here we are worshipping in our Church of the Holy Trinity, and we cannot ignore the Trinitarian aspect of this story - which was much commented on by early Christian writers. And so the great Russian icon artist Andrei Rublev transforms these three visitors into three angels, seated round an altar table and gives us the Trinitarian message of three who were identical with one another, identical, and yet distinct. And Rublev and the icon tradition in which he drew, turns these angelic figures from recipients of hospitality into the living presence of God's own hospitality towards us, for we find ourselves invited to approach this holy table, which becomes the table of sacrifice which God prepares before us,

and where God the Son reaches out through love to redeem the world. So this Christian art tradition makes the journey from the hospitality offered by Abraham, to the divine hospitality offered to us at great cost.

I wrote a poem about this Rublev icon of the Trinity, which I would like to share with you :

Three in one, in closest harmony  
Circled by love, in tender symmetry  
Offering up the Lamb who is to be  
Life for the world

Angels are they, yet hold in meaning more  
Than angels visiting at Sarah's door:  
God's life itself, ready for us to pour  
Grace on this world.

Help us then this circle now to join,  
Our lives in newborn harmony entwine  
In action mirroring the life divine  
Revealed in our world.

Now to move on to our Gospel reading, where Jesus receives the hospitality of Mary and Martha. One New Testament scholar comments that in the Gospels Jesus always seems to be going to a meal, or coming from a meal. This thread through the Gospels of the hospitality at table is inescapable. Sometimes the company that Jesus kept at table raised people's eyebrows - causing John the Baptist to send messengers to ask Jesus what he was up to. But Jesus uses the meal at table to unite and to heal and to overcome division. And by extension, He offers to us his life and grace today, in this eucharistic meal.

It seems that Mary and Martha, who are joined by brother Lazarus in the account of the fourth Gospel, provided Jesus with a kind of second home not that far from Jerusalem. It was in their company that Jesus prepared for what lay ahead of him, Mary perceiving this through the anointing of his feet.

But here in Luke we have a simple story of hospitality, one where two sisters receive rather different words from Jesus, words that can raise questions about whether contemplation in the life of faith is to be preferred to action and active service. Pope Francis tried to sort this out in some pastoral words : "It is important to understand that this is not the contrast between two attitudes : listening to the word of the Lord in contemplation, and practical service to others. They are not two opposing attitudes, but, on the contrary, they are two essential aspects of our Christian life, aspects that should never be separated, but lived in profound unity and harmony

Why is Martha rebuked, even if gently, by Jesus ? Because she considered only what she was doing essential, because she was too self-absorbed and preoccupied by things... For a Christian, the works of service and charity are never detached from the main source of all our actions : listening to the Word of the Lord, being, like Mary, at the feet of Jesus in the attitude of the disciple. And this is why Martha is reprimanded."

If we follow Pope Francis' train of thought, it was Martha's attitude to what she was doing that was misguided, rather than her actions in themselves. I am reminded of a line from George Herbert's hymn, Teach me my God and King in all things thee to see.. and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee... a servant with this clause makes drudgery divine, who sweeps a floor as for thy laws, makes that, and the action, fine." When we give ourselves wholly to a task that may feel like a chore, remembering that God is present in the whole of life, we finish it with much greater satisfaction and more quickly than if we fret over it at every moment.

However, both George Herbert and Pope Francis bring to us not only a Christian perspective on this gospel passage, but also what we might justly call a rather male perspective or viewpoint. I would like us to hear a rather different "take" on our gospel story, that by a woman poet whom I have been unable to identify. I will ask Clare to share it with us :

That Mary chose the better part is not  
Debatable. The Word is health fare  
And Jesus served it rich and piping hot.  
So Mary simply hungered for her share...  
And let her sister cook the evening meal.

But worried Martha, standing at the door,  
Could see the need for sustenance was real,  
And knowing bread was more than metaphor,  
Let slip her single, overworked complaint:  
She neee help to serve the food and drink !

Then Jesus spoke and yet that sermon grates  
A little on my soul : I've met some saints  
In kitchens too ! And so I like to think  
As Jesus lectured her, he also set the plates.