

Sixteenth Sunday of the Year July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1-10; Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42

Serving those in need and providing hospitality is considered an important Christian virtue. The readings of today reveal the unique insight of generosity given in hospitality that finds its fulfillment. Hence the central theme of today's Mass is hospitality where a person seeks to discover the divine presence in the other. In general, welcoming a guest was and still is an extremely important obligation of people living in the Orient. In the severe conditions of the desert, sometimes finding shelter can be a matter of life and death. Hospitality has been an important custom in several ethnic groups, in many parts of Asia, especially among Muslims and Jews. In the Gospel we have Martha, Mary and Lazarus welcoming Jesus to their house and show their hospitality. However, the Lord indicates that such hospitality should be without any anxiety but filled with service and love. The first and the third readings of today are set within the context of ancient near eastern customs of hospitality. Abraham discovers the presence of the divine messengers in the three visitors. These customs were very much wrapped up in the understanding of boundaries regulating the actions and activities of both men and women. In the second reading from the letter to the Colossians Paul speaks of his sufferings for Jesus as he serves the community of Christ while fulfilling his mission.

The First Reading from the book of Genesis is part of the story about Abraham happily welcoming the heavenly visitors. The three unidentified men arrive in front of Abraham's tent at the hottest time of the day. Immediately on seeing them, Abraham rushes forward to greet the strangers, bows before them, addresses them as "Lord" and, invites them to partake of his hospitality. He gives them water, washes their feet and let them rest in the shade while he offers to prepare a substantial meal for them to eat. What Abraham does is just a normal expression of hospitality to guests observed during his time. The visitors accept his invitation. Meanwhile Abraham rushes in to look for Sarah, his wife, and tells her to prepare a generous amount of food for these strangers, now their guests. He brings it to them and attends on them as their host. The heavenly visitors then ask for Sarah and they knew her name, and Abraham tells them that she is in the tent. As they take leave they promise to return in a year and by that time they foretell that Sarah will be the mother of a son. This is all the more surprising as Sarah, at this time, was far beyond the child bearing age. But this was the reward for their hospitality granted to them by God himself. It also indicates that for Abraham his faith in the divine word should be as apparent as his hospitality.

In the second reading Paul writes to the Colossian community about his own suffering and the joy with which he accepts them. His appeals to them follow patterns that were familiar in his time and world: his personal experience of suffering, his devotion to the Gentile mission, his hard work and especially his divine commission to preach God's "mystery". Paul lived his life in Christ. Because of his union with Christ, whatever he suffers can be called "Christ-Afflictions." He willingly endures these for the benefit of the Church. He tells them that what was hidden in previous times is now revealed. It is the mystery of Christ in them, the Hope for Glory. God gave Paul the role of making known this mystery among the gentiles. Paul tells them that he has become a servant for their sake. His sense of service to God in the ministry of the gospel is his essential identity as a person. His work is not removed from real people in real places; he is not

an ivory-tower in his learning, but a pastor who is intent on adapting the gospel message in ways that are useful in the lives of his readers. Paul indicates that Jesus wants his followers to continue his work by sharing in the afflictions, thus building up his body in every age. Christ is in them and they are in Christ.

In the Gospel passage, we see the true model of hospitality where Jesus is the guest. The house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus seems to have been a place where Jesus was always welcome and where he could find shelter when things were getting too hot in nearby Jerusalem. Luke indicates that Jesus was welcome there as he was a constant visitor and the presence of Lazarus is not mentioned. The incident described concerns the two sisters only. The story tells us that there were certain customs regulating the activities of men and women while showing hospitality to guests. Generally it was not permitted for a woman of the household to sit with the male visitor or engage him in conversation. They would just extend a greeting and stay discretely away when the male guest was present. Martha is upset that her sister has broken the boundary by sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words. This was equivalent to Mary assuming the role of the man in the house, certainly not an acceptable situation. Martha does her best by requesting Jesus to send her into the kitchen for the preparation of the food and also follow the custom. The shock comes when Jesus indicates that he is well aware of what Mary has done. Not only does it not bother him, he applauds her for it. He clearly says that she has chosen the better thing. The shock of Jesus' response cannot be overstated. He tells Martha that both the things, namely service and listening are important and both of them manifest service and they are equally praiseworthy.

The Gospel tells us that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus listening to him. That meant real listening, which is love in action and hard work. Most people do not listen well and often our listening is selective, with preset agenda in mind. Martha, on the other hand as a good host, was preoccupied with the task of providing hospitality. Jesus' gentle, loving and inoffensive correction of Martha was directed at her being preoccupied to the point of distraction about many things. The problem was not that Martha was just working but that she was obsessed with working. She wanted to be an extremely good host. Jesus spoke to Martha those often misunderstood words that apply to all of us. There is need of only one thing and Mary has chosen it. Jesus while speaking of the choice made by Martha and Mary did not refer to the two states of life contemplation and action and that contemplative life was better. Jesus in fact never wanted work to be separate from prayer. He wanted a balance between action and contemplation and both are necessary and important. Work and prayer have become a solid Christian tradition. St Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises calls this Contemplation in Action.

When he went to Martha's home, Jesus did not forget to also give a gift to her sister Mary: he also gave her the grace to put herself in his service, but a different service, one proper to her person. Mary received the grace of listening attentively to the word of the Master. Mary listened to Jesus speak, and the grace she received made it possible for her to understand and to meditate this word, which is none other than the Word of God. While Martha was busy in the service of the home, Mary remained in the service of the Word of God. Martha did not seem to understand that there can be different ways to serve the Lord. So she asked Jesus if he found it normal that her sister, unlike her, did not do any housework and she should be helping her. Martha would have preferred that Mary were like her and would also did housework. But, in fact, Martha was

wrong. It is not Mary who should be like her, but rather Martha who should be like Mary. And Jesus wanted her understand this and told her that she was anxious and troubled about many things; one thing was needful. Mary had chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.

The story of Martha and Mary preeminently speaks of hospitality and indicates of the presence of divinity in every guest. It happened that at that moment Mary attended to God by sitting still. At another moment she could have attended to God's interests by helping with the work. What Jesus expected of the sisters that there should be balance and we must live a free anxiety free life. Jesus tells us that one thing that is necessary for us in our lives is love and we must show it both in action and contemplation. We may be bogged down in unimportant things while we forget to treat well our brothers and sisters. This episode tells us that no custom boundary or Law should ever be allowed to come between the word of God and us. Luke emphasizes his concern for the role of women in the ministry of Jesus and the church. For him no custom or law can prevent anyone from coming and placing their self at the feet of Jesus. Many even today are shocked like Martha by this teaching.

Martha and Mary were both in the service of the Lord, for both of them had answered the call of God's grace. But the ways in which the two of them carried out this service differed. Just as a human being is composed of a soul and a body, so too is the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, composed of a spiritual aspect and a corporeal aspect. Here, Martha represented the corporeal aspect, and Mary, the spiritual aspect of the Mystical Body of Christ. Both are in the service of the Lord and of his Church, but in different ways. But, since God is spirit, the spiritual aspect of the service of the Lord is the better of the two. So all those who, in the Church, receive the grace of being in the service of God in his corporeal and material aspect must make an effort, with the help of this same grace that they have received, to transform their service to God into a spiritual service. There is nothing wrong with Martha's service - quite the contrary. But Martha did not make enough effort to lift up her soul to the Lord, in order to find in her service of taking care of her home all of its spiritual value. For, by carrying out her service in a more serene and spiritual manner, Martha too could have had a taste of the joys of contemplating the Word of God.

This story concerning Martha and Mary has often been used by spiritual writers to prove the superiority of the contemplative life over the active, pastoral form of life. That there is need and necessity for some members of Christ's body, the church, to dedicate their lives solely and entirely to meditation and prayer needs no proof. Each member of the body can and must help the other members. Most Christians cannot give much time for prayer and contemplation of God. There are members who are set apart for this purpose. With the material needs provided for by other members they can act in the name of the whole body. It is God himself who has given them a special calling for the contemplative life. But the correct lesson which the story of Martha and Mary gives us is that we must not let the affairs of this life, innocent they might be in themselves, prevent us from attending primarily to the one affair that really matters, namely our future life. The emphasis is on Martha and not on Mary. In her anxiety to be an excellent host she spreads out all her energies to prepare an excellent meal. She had no time to listen to the master's words of divine wisdom. Her work was excellent and praiseworthy yet she should not

have excluded from listening to Jesus while doing the good work at the same time. The anxiety of a person may lead to overlook what is more important in life.

The passage tells us that there is absolutely nothing that should separate us from sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his words. Nothing should ever be allowed to come between the word of the Lord and our mission. The problem is that we let almost anything do this, especially if we can declare it some kind of work. In reality no custom or tradition, norm or rule or gender should keep us away from sitting at the Lords feet. Jesus points to another dimension in Christian living, which is also of prime importance and that is the direct personal relationship between a person and God. So it is Mary who has chosen the "better" part, which is to listen to Jesus, the Word of God. Only those who have listened careful to the Word of God know how to behave in the way that God wants. Out of that listening will flow the deep concern for the well-being of other people and indeed for the whole of creation itself. Here we have the example of Mary, Mother of Jesus who kept all things in her heart and contemplated over them.

Mary the Mother of Jesus is our model in the service of the Word of God! But as Mary is the model of all of Christ's faithful, she is also the model of all those who serve God by faithfully, but spiritually, taking care of their home. She was the faithful disciple and she listened to the word of God and kept this word in her heart. Did Mary not leave Nazareth right after the Incarnation in her of the Word, in order to go and help her cousin Elizabeth with her housework? But it is in the intimacy of the Word of God, in the union with the Holy Spirit who has become her Husband, that Mary resolutely put herself in the service of the Lord and of his Mystical Body, already born.

There is a well-known fable about Jesus visiting his friends. Once Jesus promised a pious old lady that he would visit her that day. She got ready for this big event. She cleaned the house, scrubbed everything to shining, kept things in neat order and sat down there waiting for the Lord to come to her house. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. She rushed to open the door and saw only a poor shabbily dressed beggar standing outside. She was disappointed and told the beggar that she was not free and was waiting for an important guest. He must quickly go away. The beggar was confused and left as hungry as he had come. A bit later there was another knock. She ran to open the door to find a familiar old man for help. Not today for heaven's sake she told him. She was not free to take care of him and she sent him away by slamming the door. After some time there was another knock and she was certain it was Jesus and ran to the door to find a hungry beggar asking for bread. She was annoyed and sent him away empty handed. She sat down and waited for Jesus and there was no sign of him. She went to bed with heavy heart. The good Lord came to her in the dream and she complained. He said that he did come three times and she had refused entry to him.

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