**Welcome to our house!**

Genesis 18:1-10, Luke 10:38-42

20th July 2025

If you ever watch property programmes, or house conversion programmes on the TV, you will have noticed that the first thing house buyers tend to do with their newly acquired house is to demolish the wall between the kitchen and the living room. And a lot of the new houses are, in fact, already built with a kitchen-diner. The idea being that the food preparation and those doing it may not be separated from the rest of the people in the house. Presumably, the impetus for these changes, have come from those, normally being busy in the kitchen and feeling cut off from the interactions going on among the other members of the family in a separate dining room or living room. And of course, this feeling must be even stronger, when interesting visitors are being received and everybody wants to hear what they have to say.

This was certainly the case with my mother when the bishop and his wife came to pay a visit in my father’s manse. It was my mother, who was ‘distracted by her many tasks’ in the kitchen and made sure that all went well, while my father entertained the quests in another room by politely listening to them. It was only after the visitors were gone that my mother’s curiosity was satisfied as my father told her the main points of the discussions that ensued in her absence.

Having heard the two Bible stories read to us today we cannot help noticing that something similar is going on in both of them. Some visitors of even ‘higher rank’ than the bishop and his wife arrive at the tent of Abraham and at the house of Martha respectively. The question these stories are trying to answer: how do you receive these ‘high ranking’ visitors? And, by implication, how do you show hospitality, how do you make room for the divine in your life?

Abraham is the one who issues the invitation to the passing strangers. His wife, Sarah is baking the bread and overseeing the preparation of the rest of the feast somewhere in the depth of the tent. And in Bethany Mary seems to be ‘front of house’ for Jesus and his disciples’, while Martha is cooking lunch in her kitchen, which would have been at the back of the house, or in an open space in the middle of the building. So, you see, it could all be to do with the set-out of the house or the tent! There is a kind of imposed division between the two spheres of life, which is accepted and taken for granted and no one complains about it. At least, not on the surface! But if Sarah wants to know what’s going on she has to sneak up to the opening of the tent to overhear the conversations outside. A conversation, mind you, which concerns her as much as it does her husband.

And as to Martha, well, she does complain. But her complaint is not straight forward. It’s directed against her sister, yet it is addressed to Jesus, the honoured guest. So, one has to unpack this a little. Addressing Jesus, rather than having a quiet word with Mary, may indicate that perhaps deep down it is more to do with Jesus than with Mary. Thinking about all we just said about the layout of the house, you have to wonder if Martha’s real problem is not so much the need for Mary’s help, rather her envy of the place Mary had chosen. But her feeling, as she understands the duties of hospitality, prevents her to do the same.

It makes me think about the times we complain about others, or judge their behaviour. Perhaps we are not even aware that at the root of it all may lie something a bit less worthy than our righteous indignation; a simple envy, a wish that we could be brave enough or careless enough to do something similar. And if that’s the case, we can’t do better than Martha, who does take the problem to Jesus and wants to know his take on the matter. So, there is no reason to suppose that Martha wants to listen to Jesus less than her sister, even if she is expressing it in a roundabout sort of way. In fact, from another story about her in John Gospel, we are given a glimpse of her exemplary faith at the raising of her brother, Lazarus. But this time, she seems to be stuck and she needs to be educated about the true nature of hospitality.

So, how does Jesus go about it? And, indeed, how do Abraham’s visitors go about it? What can we learn about receiving God in our lives? I find it quite interesting and encouraging that Abraham’s visitors are actually asking for Sarah. The divine message, in whatever form it comes, is not constrained by prevailing social habits. It’s not just for those with specific status, who fulfil all the accepted rules and regulations. This time the message is for a couple and they both should hear it. The implication is that Sarah’s job is not restricted to providing the service she also needs to listen to the message. So does Martha. So do we all.

It is tempting, isn’t it, to understand our relationship with God by making ourselves busy serving God in and outside our churches. This, of course is, an important part of Christian hospitality; the invitation, the opening of homes, the generous provision for everyday needs, the readiness to share our resources, to make our guests comfortable and feel at home. It is something we do for each other hopefully every day. And we as a church strive to practice in our living together as God’s family.

But hospitality to God has another dimension, and we have already touched on it. ‘Entertaining’ God in our midst has wider implications, for it gives us the opportunity to open not just our homes, our churches, but open *ourselves too to the message God’s presence always brings*. And to receiving it requires our real presence, our stillness, the readiness to cease with even the most willing and worthy service. Or as we would say in today’s language: to ‘spend quality time’ with God when we can give our undivided attention. A time, when we can even stop talking. The other day someone made a lovely admission to the question ‘How does God talk to you?’ They said, ‘I don’t know, I don’t give a chance to God to say anything, I seem to be doing all the talking.’

So our hospitality, our ‘entertaining’ God, will need a willingness to listen to and ‘entertain’ the message as well

that awaits us without our constant busyness and incessant talking; A message that is loving and liberating, comforting and hope-filled, but one that may call us beyond our own narrow horizon. And as we think about this we may return to Rublev’s icon and recall its message about hospitality. Richard Rohr, the American Franciscan theologian talking about the icon, draws our attention to the small rectangular shape in the front of the tablecloth. Apparently, in the art historians’ view, on the original icon they discovered some residue of glue in that space and they think it may have contained a small mirror. Now, if this is true, Richard Rohr’s stunning conclusion is ‘there is room at the table for a fourth person – the one in the mirror, you’, who stand in front of the Divine and contemplate its beauty.

What an inspiring thought to conclude our reflections as we think of hosting the Divine in our midst! We are enabled to do it both in service and in receptive, quiet devotion as we mirror the Divine hospitality, which we show forth every Communion Sunday: the open table, where we are all invited with the rest of creation to be part of the Divine life of mutual friendship and love. May we accept the invitation and in turn issue it to others. **Amen**

*Erna Stevenson*