

Lent Address

Sunday 27 March 2022

Hospitality

The story of Samuel's calling in the Hebrew scriptures is one of my favourites. It's a compelling text because God's gentle, persistent desire to be part of his creation is held in check by Samuel's confusion, and this produces tension as we wonder whether God's presence will be noticed.

Samuel can't receive the message because he mistakes the speaker. According to scripture 'Samuel did not yet know the Lord'. It's only after Eli explains *who* is talking and *how* Samuel should reply that he's able to receive God's message, and respond.

The ability to receive a message and respond is central to Saint Benedict's writing on hospitality. In Chapter 66 of the Rule he describes the role of the doorkeeper:

At the gate of the monastery, a wise old man is to be posted, one capable of receiving a message and giving a reply, and whose maturity guarantees that he will not wander round. This doorkeeper should have a cell near the gate, so that persons who arrive may always find someone at hand to give them a reply. As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he should answer 'Thanks be to God' or 'God bless you'. Then with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he should speedily and with the warmth of charity attend to the enquirer.

The guest is immediately welcomed and attended to, and we can see that this is achieved by way of thanks, and blessing, so that the manner of welcome

instantly places the one into relationship with the other by way of God. This is further underpinned by his edict that after a guest is welcomed the first thing they should do together is pray.

This welcome that the doorkeeper is to give, 'thanks be to God that you have come' is the same joyous welcome the father gives to the return of his prodigal son- 'he saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him, and said 'let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'.' It's the same joyous welcome with which God the father introduces his son to the world: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. It is the same welcome God extends to us all.

There's nothing lukewarm about God's hospitality, and this same generosity can be seen in the wealth of instruction in the Rule on how the visitor is to be accommodated. For example, for the sake of hospitality the superior may break their fast! For the sake of hospitality, the guests and the Abbot are even to have their own kitchen! so that if guests arrive at an odd time they can be fed without disturbing anyone else. And the guests' quarters are to be overseen by one whose soul is filled with the fear of God so that visitors will be tended to with the utmost care.

This way of relating to God and each other is what hospitality is all about- and yet we are mistaken if we think hospitality ends at welcome- no matter how generous it is, for before he could give, Samuel first had to receive the speaker. It's the hospitality of giving *and* receiving that plummets us into the depths of relationship, relationship that is essentially not about *what* is received and given, but about *who*- for the message received and the reply given is Christ himself.

Gordon Lathrop, a Lutheran theologian wrote 'Draw a line that includes us and excludes many others, and Jesus Christ is on the other side of the line.'¹ Saint Benedict sees the line that sits between the known community and the stranger, between 'us' and 'them' and perhaps between what some might consider the sacred and the profane, and he insists that the doorkeeper goes over the line. He insists that the stranger is welcomed in, because he knows that Christ is in the stranger, and he wants us to be where Christ is. 'All who arrive as guests are to be welcomed like Christ', he writes in Chapter 53 of the Rule, 'for he is going to say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me''.

Going over the line we not only proclaim Christ within the world, but we open up to Christ's welcome within ourselves. St Benedict writes:

'The Abbot should give all the guests water to wash their hands and with the whole community he should wash their feet. When they have done so, they should recite the verse, *We have received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple.*'²

We may know God's grace is guaranteed through the Eucharist, but here St Benedict is saying look! If we are open to receive it, God's mercy can come to us in this most extraordinary way- those in the monastery are to *receive* God's mercy *through the other*. Indeed, the temple is there *because* the guest is there. 'How deeply transformational *receiving* hospitality can be' write theologians Keifert and Rooms, 'when we are so steeped in wanting to offer it to others on our terms.'³

¹ Quoted by Paul Bayes in his article in ViaMedia.News titled *Drawing the Line?* 22/12/21
<https://www.viamedia.news/>

² Chapter 53 of the Rule.

³ Keifert, Patrick., Rooms, Nigel. (2014) *Forming the Missional Church*. Grove Pastoral P139. Grove Books Ltd: Cambridge. p.19.

James Alison in his book *On Being Liked* writes about the moment in Acts when Peter goes to Cornelius's house and is asked to tell the Gentile household about Christ. Prior to this, the story of God was a story for Jews, and yet when Peter talks, the Holy Spirit falls on *all* who hear the word, and Peter realises that it is not possible to refuse Gentiles baptism. It becomes obvious that the Apostles *don't own God's story*.

Alison suggests that the scripture moves through three stages: 'you are no part of our narrative' to 'you can be part of our narrative, but only on our terms', to 'we are part of the same narrative, which isn't the one either of us quite thought it was and it isn't on the terms set by either of us'. This last narrative is the narrative of Benedictine hospitality, and it is through being open to the mutual growing of God's story within our lives that Christ has space to live amongst us. Saint Benedict doesn't ask us to *do* more in order to achieve something- for God's mercy and grace are freely given and unmerited, but he asks of us a generous openness- that we are attentive, and 'listen out'; the observances in the Rule are what that generosity of 'listening out' looks like within community.

Saint Benedict's thoughts on hospitality can make a difference. We aren't monks and nuns living in an enclosed community, but I think that makes his words *more* applicable to us rather than *less*. As the Body of Christ both gathered for worship, and dispersed within our own separate groups we are, each and every one of us, a doorkeeper. When we open the door may we be ready to say in our hearts, like Samuel: 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'.