

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's readings speak to us about the nature of hospitality and how God is present in a very powerful way within that context. The first reading, particularly, draws us into the mystery of how God reveals himself in an encounter of sharing and hospitality. Abraham has an experience of the divine as he goes about his daily routine at Mamre. He sees the image of three men (some scholars suggest this is a foreshadowing of the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Spirit) and offers food and respite to them. The act of hospitality is a most intimate expression of wanting to embrace and share with another. It requires the act of giving and sacrifice; something is taken, in a sense, so that something may be received. "Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterwards you may go on your way." Hospitality also connotes a disposition of thanksgiving and gratitude; in a mutual exchange, those who experience this sacrificial giving are enhanced and thereby changed for the good. Once Abraham procured food for his guests, Genesis tells us that he waited on them. The self-sacrificing posture of Abraham prepares him to be receptive and open to the message God wishes to impart to him.

God reveals to Abraham that he and his wife will bear a child in the coming year. This pronouncement parallels the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she, against all probability in the human sense, will bear the Son of God. We also see shades of how salvation history unfolds before us as Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Abraham and Sarah, will bear a son well beyond child-bearing age. Alas, nothing is impossible with God. In the translation we heard proclaimed, it is said that "I will surely return to you about this time next year..." Another translation (Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition) reads "I will surely return to you in the spring..." I prefer the latter translation because it conjures up a sense of hope and possibility as well as new life. Springtime points to a renewal of the order of things and brings us out of the frigid cold and isolation of winter to embrace the fullness of nature. Springtime also enhances our senses—they come alive to soak in and absorb that very excitement which comes with new life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a noted German theologian of the twentieth century who became a Christian martyr opposing the fascism and brutality of Nazi Germany (and of whom I will speak about in another context later). He wrote a powerful message that reflects in many ways the nature of hospitality and attentiveness to God's musings in our lives: "The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait, and the promise of fulfillment is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity."

This reflection is instructive as we reflect upon the two characters in today's Gospel from Luke. Martha is doing good work and she is gracious and hospitable, to be sure; yet, she is anxious because of her perception that Mary is being lazy and unhelpful. What is lost on Martha is that Mary, sitting at the feet of the Master, is listening to him speak to her. We sometimes forget that listening to another, being receptive and open to their message, is one of the most profound manifestations of hospitality! --Fr. Tom