

Transfiguration A 2020 & Blessing of icon of
Hospitality of Abraham

Readings: Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; 2 Peter 1.16-19; Mt
17.1-9

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When I was working in Jerusalem I learnt something about Middle Eastern hospitality. For instance, you must always leave something on your plate – very difficult if you were brought up always to leave a clean plate. But if you don't, your host will think you're still hungry and give you more. Then, you must always accept Arabic coffee, even if you don't want it. I was once visiting a Palestinian Orthodox priest in the Old City. He offered me a variety of drinks. I knew enough to go for coffee. 'You've chosen well', he said, 'coffee is friendship'.

The Middle Eastern tradition of hospitality goes back a very long way. The icon that's going to be blessed at the end of the intercessions in memory of Jay Wilson

has the inscription, 'The Hospitality of Abraham'. It depicts three angels sitting at a table with just a single dish on it, and the only thing in the dish isn't very appetising – it's a calf's head. What kind of hospitality is that? I've enjoyed much more generous entertainment in Jay and Susannah's home.

The origin of this icon is the intriguing story in Genesis 18. The chapter begins by saying that the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. But what Abraham actually sees standing in front of him are three men. As a Middle Easterner he naturally invites them to wash the dust off their feet and have something to eat. He tells his wife Sarah to make three cakes of bread, and his servant to slaughter and prepare a calf. We can only hope the visitors weren't too hungry – they must have waited a long time for their picnic under a tree.

Eventually the three men go off in the direction of Sodom. But the Lord is still there and has a long talk with Abraham about Sodom and its punishment. Then

the Lord goes off on his own, so he must be just one of the three, and the other two, who've become angels, go off in another direction. It's all very confusing: who's who and what's what?

It was Christians, more than a thousand years later, who found the answer. They'd inherited the Jewish scriptures, and once they'd acquired a New Testament, called them the Old Testament. At the same time they converted the Old to Christianity: they believed that their Christian understanding of God, rooted in the New Testament, had in fact already been lurking in the Old. It just needed Christian eyes to see it.

They believed, as we do and as the Jews do, in one God; but they and we, unlike the Jews, believed God was not just a simple One. There was of course God as Father, the God of Jewish faith. But there was also God as Son, Jesus the Christ. Jesus had been shown to be divine when he was transfigured; and the light that shone from him was the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit of the Father and of Jesus, the Spirit was also divine. Yet Father, Son and Spirit belonged together: there was

only one God, but the one God existed in three Persons – the upper-case ‘P’ is important, because in this context the word doesn’t mean what we usually mean by it. Where do we find that understanding of God in the baptised Old Testament? It’s obvious: in the story of the three men, the three angels, whom Abraham entertained, who were somehow the Lord. They’re the Old Testament Trinity.

From about the third century, Christians, especially Greek-speaking Christians, began to paint images of Christ, Mary and the saints. They painted them on the walls of catacombs and churches, and on boards as portable icons. They painted too events from the Scriptures. In due course the hospitality of Abraham came to be one of them. Normally the icon shows the three sitting at a table with various dishes on it. Abraham and Sarah stand on either side, looking after their guests; and quite often the servant is shown in front of the table, cutting the calf’s throat.

In the early fifteenth century a Russian icon painter, or writer, as the Orthodox say, produced a remarkable

version of this image. The monk Andrey Rublev left out Abraham and Sarah and the servant, though he kept a token oak of Mamre, and a tiny house representing Abraham's tent. Only the three angels were left, sitting each at one side of a table depicted as an altar. There's just one dish on it, a bowl containing the head of a sacrificed animal. The middle angel, representing the Son, is making a gesture of blessing towards the dish. The three have identical faces: there is only one God. But their clothing is different, in colour and style; and the three are inscribed within a circle, an artistic symbol of divinity. The one God has been revealed as Father, Son and Spirit.

The dish symbolises the eucharistic meal in which Christians celebrate the self-giving love of God revealed on the cross. It's set amid the three angels, to show that sacrificial love is at the heart of God, even that God, as St John says in his first letter, is love. That love is never self-contained, but is always outgoing, seeking to share itself with others. That is symbolised in Rublev's icon by the empty fourth side of the altar table. It's the side that faces whoever stands

prayerfully in front of it; it's the side for us. It's an invitation to us to feast at God's table, to share in the life of the Triune God. Rublev has transformed the Hospitality of Abraham into the Hospitality of God. God invites us to share in his life, to let his love transfigure us as it transfigured Jesus. That will draw us ever deeper into the God in whom we already live and move and have our being.

Icons, as Orthodox Christians understand them, make present what they represent, they're sacramental. That's why when you stand in front of them, you stand prayerfully, exposing yourself to the gracious and transforming presence of God. To stand before the 'Hospitality of Abraham' is to stand before the purpose of your Christian life, the goal of your life as a human being; because to be drawn into the divine love is to be transfigured by it and so to become more maturely human. As an Orthodox hymn sings, the Transfiguration of Jesus reveals not only his full divinity, but at the same time his perfect humanity.

Though they're one and the same icon, there's a difference between the Hospitality of Abraham and the Hospitality of the Triune God: the former was offered once, long ago; the latter has been, is and will be always on the table. All we have to do is accept the invitation.