

## The hospitality of Abraham

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O God,  
the strength of those who put their trust in you,  
mercifully accept our prayers  
and, because through the weakness of our mortal nature  
we can do no good thing without you,  
grant us the help of your grace,  
that in keeping your commandments  
we may please you both in will and deed.

Our text this morning may be found in Genesis chapter 18, part of verse 12:

**‘Sarah laughed . . .’**

Laughter is a gift of God. To be able to smile, to enjoy, to laugh and to cry means we have feelings, means we are humans, means we are alive, awake, aware. In our Old Testament reading this morning, part of the complex story of the patriarch, Abraham, we have a famous God–encounter which Andrei Rublev so beautifully visualised in his icon, ‘The hospitality of Abraham’.

Abraham has been told by God to leave Haran and to go to the land that God would show him, with the promise that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen12 v1 – 2). The problem, however, was that his wife Sarah was barren and had no children and so, long before IVF and surrogate motherhood, Sarah gave

Abraham her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, and they were blessed with a first born boy, Ishmael (Gen 16). But here, in our passage today, the original promise is renewed and is shortly to be fulfilled.

By the oaks of Mamre, around midday, in the heat of the day, Abraham is seated at the entrance of his tent when three strangers appear. He jumps up and offers the travellers refreshment. They pause while Abraham rushes off to do what's necessary. He brings food and drink and they eat and drink while Abraham stands by attentively. Then, the three tell Abraham that God's promise of a son by Sarah will soon be realised on their return in the Spring. In the tent, Sarah is listening to the conversation and laughs to herself because now, in her old age, when her body is long past child-bearing, the promise of a son seems a joke. Her thoughts are overheard and challenged and, understandably frightened, Sarah denies laughing. But the promise is fulfilled and then Sarah does laugh with joy having born a son whom they call Isaac.

Abraham, through Isaac, was the father of the Chosen people; through Ishmael, Abraham was the father of another great nation (Gen 21 v18). But today, I'd like to focus not on the promise of fatherhood or Sarah's laughter at the prospect and reality of motherhood but instead I want to focus on the actual description of Abraham's God encounter under the oaks of Mamre that we heard in today's reading from Genesis 18.

In the opening verse, the narrator tells us clearly that what is about to be described is a God-encounter: 'the Lord appeared to him' so we are aware at the

very start what is actually going on. But I wonder when Abraham knew. Well judging from his reaction, I'm guessing that he knew the strangers were strange right from the moment he first caught sight of them – one moment no one was there and the next moment, he could see the three standing near him. To appear like that, out of nowhere, without Abraham seeing them approach suggests something very odd. Abraham jumps up, speaks to them with respect and offers them refreshment

Now what is also odd is that there are three of them. Is one of them the Lord and the other two angels or are all three of them angels, messengers of God, speaking for God ? To a Jew, reading Genesis, there is only one God but for a Christian, with an understanding of God as one in three and three in one, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then what is described neatly presents a trinity in unity as they speak first with one voice then one of them speaks for all three. For Rublev, in his icon, God the Father, seated on the left of a low table, is clearly loved and adored by God the Son seated in the middle and God the Holy Spirit seated to the right of the table spread before them. It is a moment of calm contemplation as Abraham stands silently, attentively watching in the background.

And so for us as Christians, today's passage from Genesis continues the mystery of the Trinity, of a God encounter that in its three persons and one voice may be an early, hidden expression of our shared insight into the nature and character of God. And in Sarah's laughter, psychologically understandable, we have the rich ambiguity of our possible response to God's presence and promise in our lives.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 36 : The hospitality of Abraham

