

Courtesy and hospitality

The story of how Abraham played host to three visitors near the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18.1-15) is a very well known bible passage, but it is one which bears looking at very carefully.

First of all we learn about the rules of courtesy and hospitality of that ancient time and how the host was prepared to care for his visitors' whole being, not just offer them food.

The three visitors arrive during the midday rest period, when Abraham and his family would be staying out of the heat, but at once Abraham puts his own comfort and that of his family aside to welcome and take care of the visitors. They are invited to stop and rest from their travels in the shade; they are enjoined to wash and be refreshed; they are invited to have some food and drink. Abraham also makes it clear that he is entirely at his guests' disposal. He does not want or expect anything in return. He is their servant for as long as they remain and they can go on their way without his expecting any service from them. He is as good as his word, asking his wife to make bread and his servant to prepare some good fresh meat. He brings them food and drink



and stands by attentively to make sure they would have everything they would wish. Although expecting nothing, Abraham and his family are hugely rewarded for their hospitality and attentiveness. The visitors are heavenly visitors and God is with Abraham. In the intimate relationship that now exists between them, Abraham is promised a miracle: his wife will bear a son.

This teaches all kinds of things about hospitality and care towards others, as well as illuminating other important narratives in the Bible. Hospitality is about care of the whole person.

The host has to become a servant and seek out and address all the needs of those who are welcomed in. This tells us not only about Jesus as God's Servant to all humanity, but also about how we should behave if we seek to do God's will. Jesus washes his disciples' feet and says that we should do likewise, just as Abraham brought water to wash the feet of his visitors. The story also reminds us that Jesus says that if we treat the needy with the care they deserve, it is the same as serving God. Moreover, we should not just nurture the whole person but recognise that the relationship between host and guest is an intimate one that has a powerful spiritual dimension.

Hospitality creates opportunity for learning, friendship and unlooked for gifts. We should not offer hospitality just because it is the right thing to do but because by giving up our time, food and drink, we ourselves are enriched. No one who offered Jesus hospitality went away without learning something which offered them the hope of heaven. And every time we put ourselves out to serve others before ourselves, we create the possibility of miracles. ■

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