

## **Sermon – Ecumenical Gathering of Prayer for Christian Unity January 23, 2024**

It is interesting how Abraham ends up not delivering what he offered his visitor, but something different. He told them he would bring them “a little water” and “a little bread.” Instead, he had a “tender and good” calf be brought and prepared for them, in addition to curds and milk, which he set before them. He did not sit at table with his guests, but rather “stood by them under the tree while they ate.”

Between the moment Abraham makes the offer and the delivery, he asks his wife Sarah to prepare cakes using choice flour. Perhaps Abraham did not wish to seem arrogant, or maybe he wanted to surprise his guests. In any case, it seems wise to not raise expectations too high, risking not being able to honor them. But there is no doubt that, overall, Abraham’s attitude was humble. Abraham's familiarity with the Lord allowed him to understand in his heart what we learn from the letter to Hebrews, where we read: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.”

Later on, Abraham and Sarah receive the child for whom they had prayed and hope intensely for a long time. ¿Was Isaac the prize for good hospitality? I believe it is the other way around. Abraham and Sarah were such good hosts because they knew no gratitude was enough for all the blessings they had already received. Rather than reproaching what they had not received,

they are purely grateful. Abraham wishes to exceed the expectations of the three visitors simply because his closeness to God allows him to realize that, despite whatever misfortunes he has experienced, his own expectations had been exceeded. In the end, his expectations are exceeded all the more.

Abraham's trust and gratefulness were not always as lavish. He went through a learning process. After the initial covenant God made with him, Sarah and Abraham's imperfect trust led him to father Ishmael by Hagar, his wife's maid. But God persevered raising him in the faith, even in his old age.

Abraham's commitment to live by God's word took hold when he allowed himself and his household to be marked by the sign of fertility. It was not until after he had accepted to take on the sign of the covenant for himself and his people, that his faith matured enough to welcome God's presence through the three visitors. Even so, we know that Abraham's faith continued to be tested and strengthened in a way that even prefigures God's sacrifice of his only begotten Son. Such is the invitation we receive today to increase our generosity in response to the Lord's gift for us.

Unlike many of his descendants, Abraham understood that he was chosen by God not merely for his own sake. First of all, it was for God's own sake, in the Lord's unsearchable mystery. Second, it was for his faith to grow out of himself and be poured onto a promised people, "as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore." (Gn 22:17). God's gift was not for Abraham to keep for himself. Likewise, the scholar of the law in the gospel – who after trying to test Jesus answered him honestly

– received an unexpected response from the Lord which exceeded his expectations. Although it is a challenge, and the interrogator may feel referred to in the thieves, the priest and the Levite, if he is hospitable to the word of God he can understand that he himself is the poor man wounded by his own sins.

In the same way, the children of the heavenly Father, and even the baptized who share the faith that his Son Jesus gave us, lie wounded and half dead like the man in the parable. How strong is our faith to be able to welcome God's word coming from unexpected visitors? Do we dare ask, "who is my neighbor?" Or are we even bolder to accept the challenge of becoming neighbors to God approaching us under the guise of the sick, the stranger, the imprisoned, the unbeliever, those who do not think or worship alike? To whom may I become a better witness of God's love with the help of God's grace? How willing am I to allow for my loving outreach to turn me into an outcast?

Pope Francis has said: "Jesus reverses the perspective... You can become neighbor to any needy person you meet, and you will know that you have compassion in your heart, that is, whether you have the capacity to suffer with the other." May God's grace allow our gratitude to make room for a love like the Good Samaritan's to find generous hospitality among us.