

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 July 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Today's collect is reminiscent of the Collect for Purity, that beautiful prayer with which Anglican Eucharists have customarily begun, in that it acknowledges that there is nothing about us that God does not know, and, based on that fact, asks that God in his mercy give us what God alone knows we need. In the Collect for Purity we ask that God, knowing our limitations, enable us to worship worthily. But in today's collect we cast a broader net, asking God to give us all the things we truly need, because only God knows what they are.

That is the basis of our relationship with God: that God does indeed have compassion on our ignorance and weakness, on all our mortal shortcomings, and generously gives us what we need. It is not up to us to earn the gift of life – or redemption – or hope – or whatever. It is a free gift, flowing out from the Love which is God.

And we in turn are called to give of ourselves to everyone else, mirroring God's infinite generosity. Today we have read two of the most painted stories in all of scripture: the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre, and Mary and Martha welcoming Jesus to their home at Bethany. I expect we all have particular paintings, etchings, or drawings that come immediately to mind.

The three at table at Mamre have come to symbolize the Holy Trinity itself. Copies of Rublëv's icon are in churches throughout the world, reminding us that God is infinitely gracious and welcoming, leaving a place for us at the table and inviting us to the feast. Mary and Martha have been portrayed over and over as archetypes of Christian life, and have given their names to countless guilds organized for all manner of service. Each story is filled with layers of possible meaning and interpretation. Let us look at them in terms of this particular collect.

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, ...

Abraham and Sarah have been wandering for many years, following God's call faithfully – and more than once wondering if what they were doing made any kind of sense, if the promises they thought were theirs were in fact real. They wondered and wandered and persevered. Sometimes Abraham did ask, did challenge God as to whether the land and offspring promised would ever be his. What did he and his wife need that God might provide? Connection, reassurance, a child. That is what these lovely messengers brought.

Abraham immediately responded with joy to the connection, to the opportunity to provide welcome. He bustled and he got Sarah to bustle – and they provided bountiful provisions for the visitors. They stepped aside from their own worries and doubts and gave themselves over to hospitality. And the scene ends with that

remarkable reassurance that Sarah will indeed bear a child of her own, even though she is well past childbearing age, that in fact she will have the child within the year. Can you imagine their surprise? No wonder Sarah laughed. But this is God providing exactly what they need, whether they deserve it or not, whether they ask for it or not.

Now look at Mary and Martha. They and their brother Lazarus have been faithful followers of Jesus, listening, serving, striving to understand and to help and to do what he asks. Undoubtedly they have experienced confusion like everyone else, probably also anxiety, concern about what Jesus' fate will be, about what may happen to them – all sorts of internal turmoil. What do they need? Most of all they need Jesus with them – and here he is. Mary feels a need to sit at his feet, bask in his presence and absorb his teaching – and he lets her do this. Martha, on the other hand, feels the need to provide food for everyone, to show the kind of proper hospitality that Abraham and Sarah showed, and he lets her do that. They are both able to have the sort of relationship with God-come-among-us that they need in that moment. What they are not able to do is demand that other people do or be the same. When Martha complains about Mary, “Can't you see that I am doing all of this work while she is just sitting there? Can't you tell her to help me?” Jesus responds, in effect, “Leave Mary alone. She is doing what she needs to do.”

So just as God meets our needs regardless of our worthiness or even our awareness, we are expected to give space to one another, to recognize that each of us has our own relationship with God, our own spiritual path. And we are meant to honor that, as God does.

Abraham and Sarah were ancient nomadic herders. Few of us can truly imagine what their lives were like, what they thought about on awaking or lying down to sleep in their tent. Surely they had worries about the survival of their livestock, the management of their servants and slaves, the finding of good water and grazing, that are beyond our experience. Similarly, they could have no conception of the complexities of modern urban and suburban life, of plane travel or internet communication. We do, however, share a relationship with the Triune God who loves each of us just as he loved them, who knows our needs for assurance and connection as well as he knew theirs. What we share across the millennia is that call to trust the God who loves us enough to come to us in our need, to bless us beyond our imagining, perhaps with things we never thought to ask. And we share the call to act out of that same generosity ourselves, blessing all those we encounter.

Sometimes it is tempting to think that the overflowing generosity of God is reserved for a select few, for particular kinds of people. Merely looking at the list of observances for this week gives a glimpse of the ‘wideness in God's mercy’, the inclusiveness of God's love – and the effect it has in urging people on to lives of self-giving service. They are an extremely varied group.

We begin the week with Father Bartolomé de las Casas, who spent much of the first half of the 16th century in the Spanish colonies in the Americas. God granted him compassion and wisdom to recognize and champion the natural rights of the oppressed native populations. He had extraordinary learning and insight, as

well as passion, which led to significant changes in Spanish policy. Then we go all the way back to the fourth century where the lovely and wealthy Macrina gave up family wealth and privilege and educated her remarkable brothers who became leaders of the church with a legacy affecting all who came after. Sharing the day with Macrina we now have the redoubtable Adelaide Case, first female professor at an Episcopal Seminary. Her challenges were exceptional in that pioneering position, but God granted her a faith that shone brightly for all to see, and inspired all who encountered her. Then on a single day we remember four powerful and stalwart leaders of change in nineteenth century America: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth, & Harriet Ross Tubman, women of extremely varied backgrounds whose encounters with God led them to be champions of the poor, the outcast, and the ignored. Then we come to our Saint of the Week, Albert John Luthuli, with his tireless work for fairness and justice in South Africa. These last five all endured serious persecution and danger, in which they were given the gift of hope by the God who knows what we need always. Then magnificent Mary Magdalen from whom Jesus cast our seven demons, meeting a need she had no way to articulate and inviting her into a whole new life.

The week concludes with Thomas á Kempis, whose life of devotion in the fifteenth century led to the writing of a little book that has been printed in more languages than any other outside the Bible. As God gave him the communal life of worship that he needed, he in turn gave inspiration to countless others.

Different countries, different languages, different centuries, different ethnicities, different struggles, different challenges, different gifts. Some rich, some abjectly poor; some men, some women; some private, some public; some scandalous, some decorous. No one of us would like all of them, or invite all of them to our houses. But God's love and concern knows no such limitations of personal taste and comfort. Each one faced disappointments and pain, moments of doubt and confusion, but God was with each one to provide what each needed to continue their spiritual journeys, their work with God in blessing the world.

We may or may not find ourselves bustling about like Abraham or Martha, when we see God's blessing coming into our lives, but, whatever our response, we will know ourselves loved and we will know that in the grand economy of God "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." Amen.