

16th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The well-known early 15th century icon by the Russian Andrej Rubljow, sometimes referred to as the 'Trinity', is inspired by the first reading of today's Mass in which God reveals himself to Abraham in the form of three visitors who share a meal with Abraham and his wife Sarah in their tent, and who, in the course of conversation, promise that when they call again the following year Sarah will have a son. They are referring to Isaac the miraculous child through whom God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. This reading and the icon capture the mood of today's Mass. We are invited to reflect on the intimacy that God wishes to have with us. He wishes to be at home with us, and that we be at home with God, symbolised by God coming into our home (our tent) and sharing the intimacy of a homely meal with us.

During the 40 years of their journeying through the desert of the Sinai peninsula, the people of Israel lived in tents. They knew that God was journeying with them, and so they had a special tent ('tabernacle') set aside for God. They were very conscious of their own broken, sinful lives and so they made sure that God's tabernacle, God's tent, was pitched *outside* the camp.

The Incarnation changed all this. In the prologue to his gospel, John, the beloved disciple, gives expression to his wonder and delight when he speaks of the Word of God 'pitching his tent among us'. In his first letter he gives lyrical expression to the wonderful experience it was to see Jesus and to listen to the words that came from his heart, and to touch him with his own hands and experience the warmth of Jesus' embrace. The beautiful homely intimacy described in the story of Abraham and his guests became a real, everyday event in the lives of those who were privileged to know Jesus. His closeness made them realise how much they meant to God who wanted to come so close to them by sharing their everyday lives - their joys and their tears. In Jesus God lived and died as one of us. This is the central mystery of our faith.

In the second reading, Paul sums up the essence of our hope, and it is the fact that Christ is among us. He is still among us, as he promised: 'I am with you always, till the end of the world'(Matthew 28:20). He talks about coming right into our souls, and bringing with him the Father and the Spirit of love. He talks about making his home in us. Our bodies, consecrated in baptism, are his favourite tent or tabernacle as he journeys with us, day and night. He comes to us in a special way here in the Eucharist, and the tabernacle here in the Church, reminds us that he is here in the midst of the Church, dwelling with us. From this tabernacle he comes to us in communion. In the Book of Revelation we hear Jesus promise: 'I am standing at the door, knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me'(Revelation 3:20).

In the desert, the people of Israel, aware of their own sinfulness, stood at the entrance to their tents when Moses went to consult with God. They did not dare take their impurity into God's presence. In the Gospel, we see God in Jesus eating and drinking with sinners like us. Many of the religious people were shocked. They grumbled and complained, but Jesus refused to let them stop him welcoming sinners and being welcomed by them. he loved to eat and drink with them. It is the same today. Sin does not keep us away from Jesus any more than it did when he walked this earth with us. Not even sin that we have not repented of is a barrier to the insistence and intimacy of his welcome. In fact it is precisely the astonishing love of his heart that made it possible then for sinners to change their way of looking at life and their way of

behaving. It is the same today. At the same time, we do not want to take his love for granted. Love has its own demands, and so it should be. We would be foolish to experience the intimacy of his presence and to still go on living distracted empty lives, chasing false values when the love for which our hearts long is calling us to truth and to life.

It is this point that is picked up in the Responsorial Psalm. The translation in the lectionary does not express it well, but the psalm begins by asking: 'Lord, who shall dwell in your tent?' It goes on to say: 'The person who walks without fault'. This does not mean that Jesus only welcomes the sinless, but it does mean that his welcome calls us, as he once so beautifully said, 'to be perfect as your Father is perfect'(Matthew 5:48). Jesus comes into our tent and invites us into his to share a meal with him. He gives us a share in his own love so that grace will transform our lives till we love with Jesus' own love and share his communion with his Father. The psalm continues. To dwell in God's tent means to learn to act with justice. Jesus asked us to 'hunger and thirst for justice'(Matthew 5:6), that is to say, to give our whole heart to doing God's will. In this way we will be drawn into ever closer communion with God and will radiate this life out to those with whom we live. The psalmist speaks also of 'speaking and doing the truth from the heart'.

This brings us to the Gospel. It follows immediately on last week's Gospel of the Good Samaritan, and needs to be read in conjunction with it. You remember that the lawyer asked Jesus about how to really live to the full. He spoke about loving God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength and also of loving his neighbour as himself. Jesus told him that his understanding was correct. All he had to do was to live that way. Jesus went on to tell him that he could not pick and choose his neighbour. Our neighbour is any and every person whom we encounter on the path of life, even those we might be tempted to call our enemies. Jesus loved in this way, and at the Last Supper his one command to his disciples was that we love one another as he loves. How do we do that? The answer is in today's Gospel and is found in the first commandment. God is love and the key to learning to love other people is found in loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. This is what Mary is doing in the Gospel. Jesus is there sharing a meal with these two women whom he loves. Mary's heart is awake and nothing can distract her from giving all her attention to Jesus. She is listening to the words of love that he shares with her, and she is listening to the response of her own heart to him. They are at home with each other. She is learning to love by experiencing how much she herself is loved by God.

Martha, on the contrary, is worried and distracted. This is the point Jesus is making. What Martha is doing is not the problem. What she is doing is beautiful. She is preparing the meal they are to share. Her problem is that her heart is worried and distracted. Instead of focusing her heart on the love Jesus is offering her and the loving response that is awakened in her heart, she is envious of Mary. We do this when we wish we were someone else, or wish we were somewhere else, or when we live in the past or the future. The lives we lead tend to drag us away from the centre. We tend to be worried and distracted like Martha. Sure there are many demands being made upon us, and we have many responsibilities. To neglect them would be irresponsible. Often, too, we are in a destructive situation.

The answer given here by Jesus is not to stay in that situation, or to let ourselves be exhausted by our occupations because other people expect it of us or because there seems to be no way out. The answer is to stay in touch with our heart now and to trust now that God loves me and is

dwelling in my heart. God wants me to live and to love to the full, here and now - even if, like Jesus, I find myself on a cross. No one can stop me loving. If I attend to him who is present with me and who longs to be intimate with me, and if I listen for the movement of his Spirit in my heart, he who loves me will guide me as to how best to live this present moment so as to find the insight and the courage to take the next step of love. Sometimes this next step will be to do what I am doing with more grace and more patience. Sometimes it will be to stop doing what I am doing or stop being where I am and to change direction

I am asked to trust that the one who loves me will guide me, but I cannot be guided if I am caught up in worry and distraction. Love can grow only through intimacy. The presence of Jesus in the tabernacle is a constant reminder of the fact that he longs to dwell among us. He longs to enter into each of our souls with all the love that burns in his heart for us. There are times when we will be called upon to do what Martha is doing. Hopefully we can find time also to do what Mary is doing. But whatever we are doing let us do it with our heart and soul embraced by God's love. Let us place our worries in his heart and watch them consumed in his love. Let us allow our hearts to be awake to the intimacy of grace and know that he is with me and with us on every stage of our journey.