

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Genesis 18.1-10a)

Abraham's Hospitality

This splendid story of Abraham entertaining the three strangers is chosen by the Church to pair with the gospel reading of Martha and Mary as an example of hospitality. But it has many other aspects.

In the story, the three men shimmer between being one and three. Since they clearly represent God - in a delightfully human way - this has been understood from the time of the earliest Church writers to be a hint of the Trinity, although the Trinity is not revealed until the New Testament.

Another vital aspect is that it features the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of a great posterity to Abraham. Abraham's faith has been tested by having to wait until both he and his wife are well beyond the normal age of conception, and now at last the Lord shows his care for them. A charming aspect comes just after the end of the reading: Sarah laughs at the idea of a child at her age: this makes a pun on Isaac's, her son, name, which means laughs or smiles. This pun recurs several times in the Isaac story. For the sequel to the story, Abraham's bargain with God, we must wait until next week!

Question:

How has God tested your faith?

Second reading:

(Colossians 1.24-28)

Paul's Sufferings for Christ

The letter to the Colossians, begun last Sunday and read over four Sundays, is one of the latest of the Pauline letters. Some scholars think it was written not by Paul but by a disciple, thoroughly familiar with his thought, applying his master's ideas to a new situation. In any case, it is part of inspired scripture.

The mystery revealed only at the end of time, which Paul was commissioned to proclaim, is that the salvation promised to Abraham and his kin now extends to all people. This is the riches of his glory.

Paul is also very aware that his own sufferings and tribulations in the apostolate mirror and complete those of Christ. When he says that he is 'completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' he does not mean that Jesus' Passion was somehow faulty or deficient. Rather, he means that, as the Body of Christ, the Church in every age must be a suffering Church. His confidence rests in his sufferings, for they enable him to say that he is the Servant of the Lord Jesus in just the same way as Jesus is the Suffering Servant of the Lord. In 2 Corinthians, when others claim more authority than he has, he replies by saying that he has suffered more.

Question:

Is suffering part of our mission as members of the Church? Why? How is this fulfilled?

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Gospel:

(Luke 10.38-42)

Martha and Mary

Martha and Mary have become the classic figures in the Church representing two different styles of life, the active and the contemplative vocation, an active apostolate or a life of prayer.

Carried to an extreme, this opposition is, of course, merely silly. No active apostolate can thrive unless it grows out of a life of prayer, for we cannot draw others to the knowledge and love of a God whom we do not ourselves know and love. Neither can a life of prayer be genuine unless it leads to care for others and concern for the salvation of all those whom the Lord loves. Even a strictly enclosed community cannot claim to be a part of Christ's body unless its fabric is one of love and concern for all the members, and especially those in need, the elderly, the sick and the young.

In fact, Jesus does not present any such choice between two different religious ways of life. His speech is always in terms of absolutes. He does not use comparatives; he says that Mary has chosen not 'the better' but 'the good part'. Any 'good' life must be founded on listening devotedly to the Lord and responding to what we have heard.

Question:

How important a part does listening to the Lord play in my life as a Christian?
