

Sunday 20 July 2025 (Proper 11) - *The Rublev Ikon and Hospitality* – Michael Bayley

At this Sunday service, we welcome Annabelle O'Neill in baptism into the Christian community. Michael Bayley takes the Rublev Ikon as a visual cue to focus on the hospitality that links today's two Bible readings.

Readings:

Genesis, 18: 1-10; Luke, 10: 38-42.

Sermon: *The Rublev Ikon and Hospitality* – Michael Bayley

The Old Testament reading from Genesis is a story about hospitality and its sometimes surprising consequences. Picture Abraham sitting at the door of his tent shaded by one of the oaks at Mamre where he was camped. It was hot and perhaps he had dropped off to sleep: he wakes up, looks up and there are three men standing in front of him. His immediate reaction is to Invite them to a meal, traditional hospitality of the time. “My Lord”, he says, “if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves.” They agree. Abraham hastens into the tent to Sarah, and says, “Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.” And Abraham runs to the herd, and takes a calf, tender and good, and gives it to the servant, who hastens to prepare it. Then he takes curds, and milk, and the calf he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

This story is the subject of the famous fifteenth-century ikon by Andrei Rublev.



In the story in Genesis the three men or the three angels are the voice of the Lord or Yahweh and the particular point of this appearance is to tell Abraham that his wife Sarah, who is well beyond child bearing age, will have a son in the spring. In the icon the artist Andrei Rublev portrays the men/angels as representing the Trinity with God the father on the left, with God the son in the middle and God the Holy Spirit on the right. Painted in the early 15th century the

icon is a theological statement which invites us to contemplate the nature of God and the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. In particular it emphasises the concept of divine love and community.

However I want to take up a different aspect, namely the way it portrays the central importance on hospitality and welcoming the stranger. The welcoming of the stranger must not be seen as an act of exceptional kindness or generosity: it was seen as the right and proper and natural way in which the stranger should be honoured, respected and welcomed. In the gospels this is particularly evident in the way Jesus related to the outcast, like lepers or tax collectors like Zaccheus and note how he went and shared Zaccheus' hospitality at a meal. Or consider the way he related to women and treated them as equals. Or perhaps the most striking example is the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is an attitude of openness and welcome, an assumption of a common humanity, an awareness that we are all children of God. Hospitality is not seen in the gospels as a tiresome duty but one of the things that makes life worthwhile.

Consider Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus turns the water into wine so that it will continue to be a really good party. Jesus obviously got thoroughly fed up with the miserable brigade. Luke records Jesus saying: "John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say 'He has a demon.' The son of man has come eating and drinking; And you say, 'Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" [Luke 7: 33 -34] Jesus loved sharing meals with people. And this is nowhere more obvious than when he chose to have a meal with his 12 disciples on the night before he died. The fact that we still rejoice in his special and particular presence with us at a meal, namely this meal the Holy Communion or the Eucharist speaks volumes. Faith is about hospitality, welcome, generosity, inclusion, celebration, friendship, love, kindness and fellowship.

This way of thinking and living seems to be under threat in the world we live in today especially due to the assumptions that are being made by some people in power about what is the proper way in which people should relate to one another. It feels as though many of our relationships especially corporate ones are becoming poisoned.

The community of the church into which Annabelle is being welcomed today stands as a bulwark against this miserable what's in it for me culture. May she find her membership of the church and the welcome she receives enables her to be an open, welcoming, kind generous person whose life shines with the love and generosity of Jesus.

It would be good to be able to say that this is summed up in today's gospel reading but it is not as simple as that. Jesus comes into a village and a woman named Martha receives Jesus into her house. She has a sister called Mary who sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching but does absolutely nothing whatsoever about getting lunch ready. Martha is naturally fed up and asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her, which seems a very reasonable request. But she gets nowhere. Jesus says: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her."

Frankly I don't know what to make of that. I suppose you could say that this was an opportunity for Mary to get a chance to talk with Jesus and she should not be deprived of it. If this means that you, Martha, have to get lunch ready by yourself, I'm sorry but on this occasion that's how it is. It is important that Mary does get that opportunity. I suppose you could say that this is a warning against developing a martyr complex. Oh! I'm always doing the boring things like getting lunch ready while other people are enjoying lots of spiritual fulfilment. However the fact remains that if you want to be hospitable somebody has to get the lunch ready.

As so often the gospels grapple not with life as we would like it to be but life as it is. We constantly have to choose but perhaps we should be more aware of who pays the highest price for our choices. So, Annabelle, I hope you will learn when to be the Martha who makes hospitality possible, and when to be the Mary who sits at her Lord's feet and listens. In order to reach some sort of conclusion I'm going to finish with the poem by George Herbert *The Elixir*. We had it at our wedding but my wife said that she was not going to sing the verse about making drudgery divine. However, on this occasion, I have included it.

'The Elixir'

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.

Amen

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