



SIEBENQUELL

The challenge of true hospitality: Martha's kitchen I



Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk 10, 38-42)

Jesus probably knows this house in Bethany very well. He enjoys and appreciates the hospitality, the food and the revitalising friendship he finds there.

Let's imagine this scene. The guests and hosts are together in the same large room. There sits Mary, soaking up the words of the Teacher. There are also the disciples who are received in the name of their Master. Martha is more in the background, perhaps even in the next room. Her self-chosen and favoured place is the hearth fire of the house. At that time, the hearth was built against the wall that was open to the inner courtyard. And there are obvious services to be performed here. It's about more than cooking. She has to make sure that the fire burns and stays burning. Of course, you also make sure that everything goes into the pots, but it's also about

going back and forth, serving and preparing the food. A table is also set, which of course does not take place in the next room. That's why there has to be a constant passing of the assembled guests. All of this is a rather realistic picture of the hospitality that Marta offers.

Before we go any further in the story, we should take a very close look at what Jesus later wants to talk to Martha about. He is in no way criticising her hospitality or her willingness to go out of her way for it. Such an image of hospitality is not to be despised, and Jesus is a great teacher of the stories of salvation that flow from authentic hospitality. He stands in a great biblical tradition that honours hospitality as something divine.

After all, there are biblical models for this. Just think of the story of the oaks of Mamre in the book of Genesis.

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. (Gen 18, 1-8)

Just as Abraham entertained the messengers of God, Jesus is entertained here in the house of Martha and Mary, just as lovingly and caringly, just as generously and appreciatively. Like Abraham, Martha also wants to give her guests only the finest and best. There is a good heart in her that is truly generous to others.

But such scenes of hospitality also harbour dangers. Since we have very high expectations of ourselves as the hosts, we can also understand that, like Martha, we are then afraid that we will be left owing this hour and these guests something. Like Martha, we can also understand the fear that we might not succeed in our hospitality. A willingness to serve always harbours the fear that we might fail in our service. A willingness to serve also creates pressure, because others are waiting for us and at the same time they have expectations of us.

(To be continued.)

Erik Riechers SAC

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