

“All visitors who call are to be welcomed as if they were Christ, for he will one day say “I was a stranger and you took me in” (Mt 25). And fitting courtesy should be paid to all, but especially to those of the household of the faith and to those from foreign parts.”

The beginning of chapter 53 The Reception of Guests in the Rule of St Benedict. Followed almost immediately by the injunction to pray together not least to prevent the kiss of peace being misinterpreted. And it goes on in this vein – there’s no mistaking it’s religious intent: the divine law is read to the guest for his edification, hands and feet are washed by the Abbot and the community followed by a verse from Psalm 47

“We have received oh God thy mercy in the midst of thy temple.”

And the qualification that

“It is in the welcome given to the poor and the strangers that special attention should be paid, because in them Christ is more truly received; for in the case of the wealthy the awe they inspire itself ensures respect.”

So this isn’t a welcome given because the monastic community is seeking material gain but because something of the mystery of God is present within each one of us and something more is going on, something new is being created, each time this mystery is invoked, each time a meeting takes place between persons. If of course we get too self-conscious about this there’s the danger of a transactional analysis taking over again – one hopes for an increase in holiness, for a spiritual gain, for future friends in heaven. I’m not sure there’s any way round that apart from just getting on with the business of serving ones neighbour, this new neighbour at the door and relying on prayer, whether ones own or others, to sanctify the proceedings, to keep the heart pure, to make the action transparent – that is without guile or hope of gain. *“Just get on with it”* as I think Jesus is saying to Martha, your time for prayer will also come, for the luxury of sitting at my feet in contemplation. That tension is very much here, and in the Rule of St Benedict – when to serve and when to leave guests to their own devices, or to the care of the specifically commissioned monk or nun. It’s not a perfect science – so much depends on each person’s individual response to God’s call and their character but the habit of hospitality is a good place to start, that is the discipline of welcoming another in as gracious a manner as possible whatever ones own feelings or prejudices at the time. A smile goes a long way and the blessing goes both ways. As we learn to love so we too are changed, as we learn that it is to let grace into the narrative, to let Christ do the writing, find the words that yet escape us. For each interaction is unique – whether with strangers or those well known to us. We don’t have to force the issue but if we can both step forward to meet the challenge and stand back to allow God’s creative energy to work then we will find something new, something entirely unexpected, can take place – a Christ-event such as the birth of a child to Abraham and Sarah, and, thinking of the depiction of Mary and Martha in John’s gospel, the raising of a loved one from the dead, a scene in which Mary and Martha once again hold those two aspects of action and contemplation in tension, signifying the tension always at work within each one of us. It is of course a false opposition – what is going on is much more dynamic than that, a mystery of Christ at work in us, re-creating us by the minute to the point where the distinction between knowing this and not knowing this no longer matters. Someone knocks at the door and we just get on with it.

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