

'Prepare - to share': Sermon for 21st July 2013 by Mark Pilgrim

If you come to St Peter's this time next week there could be a slightly different feel about this place. Things might not be quite as you have found them today: there might even be a slightly different aroma in the air.

Why? Because my wife and I and other members of our family are preparing for the marriage of our daughter Faith on Saturday – and this building, St Peter's, is going to be the Reception venue. So where you are sitting will be round tables with chairs around – and the Young Families aisle will have tables laden with food for a big buffet. Next week, therefore, the Young Families might not need to have breakfast before they come – there could be some rich pickings if one or two things get left behind!

As a family, we are really looking forward to Faith and Tom's marriage and to welcoming 140 family and friends to eat, drink and be merry for the rest of the day. And please do come to the Wedding Service at 1.30pm in the Cathedral if you would like to join the fun!

All of this, of course, doesn't happen without some preparation!

As it happens, our daughter Faith and her fiance Tom delight in planning and organising and, as I gather is the pattern nowadays, they have done huge amounts of work for their own wedding. But there is still quite a lot of preparation still to do. On Friday, for instance, I shall be setting to with others to prepare this church for the Reception – removing all the books and putting all the chairs in different places so that the Wedding Breakfast can take place here! As I say, if things aren't exactly as you are used to finding them, blame the Pilgrims!

Hospitality is delightful – but it can be quite hard work. Often when we want to share something of ourselves, spending time and effort on preparing helps make things go smoothly and well. What we – and all hosts - need to do, I suggest, is 'Prepare – to share'. Providing hospitality is what we see some of the main characters in our Bible passages doing today.

Abraham and Sarah don't get any advance notice of the call on them, in a desert environment, to share their food and water. Abraham looks up, you might remember, as he sits at the entrance of his tent in the middle of the day to find three men standing near him. Instantly he defers to them, running to invite them to share the water and food he and his wife have at their disposal. Once the invitation is made and accepted, the preparations start in earnest: no popping out to Tesco's here! Cakes are made from scratch and a whole calf is slaughtered and butchered to provide for the needs of these unknown travellers. The preparations are clearly labour intensive and generous. A whole calf is prepared to provide food for three men – who says 16oz steaks and beefburgers are a modern invention! It looks like pigging out on beef was happening thousands of years ago – not just in modern times!

What happens after all this preparation and sharing of food and drink as a form of hospitality? Abraham and Sarah receive the astounding news that they will have a child – and, as we later read, this son is Isaac and, with his birth, Abraham and Sarah become the founders of the people of God's special purpose, the people of Israel. This picture of hospitality, then, ends with a glorious outcome, involving a bit of unlooked for and costly preparation along the way.

Now let's look at the second Bible passage – the one about Martha and Mary. As with Abraham and Sarah, the arrival of visitors means that the householders are duty bound, under the culture of the time, to provide food for whoever turns up. Now here's a question: how many did turn up at Martha's place – causing Martha to go into meltdown when her sister chose not to help her? We aren't told. All we know is that Jesus was welcomed into Martha's home – and that Jesus was travelling with some disciples at the time. Rather alarmingly though, earlier verses in the same chapter are all about the sending out and return of seventy disciples – and there is nothing to suggest this number has diminished by the time they get to Martha's house. Imagine that 7- seven 0 – people pitching up at your place and you're expected to feed them. No wonder Martha blows a fuse when Mary is doing nothing obvious to help! How would you feel if two coach loads of people turned up at your place and you were then expected to prepare food and drink for them all! Here, clearly, hospitality is being experienced, by Martha at least, as a considerable burden. For Mary, however, the experience is different. She experiences Jesus' visit as an opportunity to learn and absorb God's presence and teaching,

as mediated to her and to all the world through Jesus of Nazareth. Rather than be active and serve, she feels drawn to be still and listen. And I suggest that taking this path of stillness and attentiveness may well have required rather more preparation and forethought than you and I might imagine. Why? Because the practice of being a disciple, of sitting at the feet of a rabbi was something done at the time by men but not - but not – by women. Mary, therefore, was taking quite a risk and stepping way out of line in daring to join the men at Jesus' feet, attending to his teaching, rather than staying in the background and cooking up a feast to feed Jesus and his entourage. Being prepared to be still and share the experience of learning from Jesus and with his other disciples was, according to the *mores* of the time, deeply counter-cultural. It would have taken courage to put into action.

What's interesting, of course, is that Mary would not have had this opportunity if her sister Martha had not offered hospitality in the first place. Mary's discipleship is enabled by Martha's service.

Now let's fast forward this examination of hospitality and what it takes to 'prepare to share'. Let's think about hospitality and chances to share in our own context, here at St Peter's.

Last Wednesday evening two people offered some nibbles and refreshing drinks and one person prepared some materials to host a meeting about House Groups in the Meeting Room. We had no idea how many people would come. Encouragingly, more people came than we first put out chairs for - and, also encouragingly, we didn't run out of food and drink (possibly helped by the fact that many people, including me, had eaten well just beforehand!). But, on the basis of this preparation, and by dint of people being prepared to set aside an evening to share their experience of St Peter's House and Fellowship Groups currently, much encouragement was provided for myself as your Vicar and, I reckon, for members of these groups as they exchanged views on how their groups supported and developed the Christian faith of their members.

Being prepared to attend the meeting, reflect on the pros and cons of recent courses and suggest how leadership, hosting and attendance of House Groups can be encouraged in the future amounts, I suggest, to a reflection in some degree of both Martha and Mary from our Gospel reading. Activity and stillness, serving and listening are all part of House Group participation. No groups happen without people being active and prepared to host and lead: but equally no groups happen without people being prepared to listen attentively and learn.

Details of the House Groups available in the autumn will be publicised in coming weeks. I myself want to participate in one of them. I recommend and want to encourage everyone here to give one of them a go. The times during the week when they meet continues to grow. One meets on a Wednesday morning, three meet in the afternoon and the rest meet on weekday evenings. Please do prepare to share with others in exploring Christian faith within the context of a small group. The bible study, discussion, prayer and fellowship they offer possibly do more to build us as a church and transform us in God's service than any other single activity. They flow out of the preparedness of a host to offer hospitality – as, three thousand years ago and more, the People of Israel flowed out of Abraham and Sarah's willingness to offer hospitality to three people – thus entertaining angels unawares. House Groups also offer opportunities to serve as Martha served and, crucially, to learn as Mary learned. So, I urge you, through St Peter's House Group programme: be prepared to share – above all, be prepared to share your time and attentiveness as Mary did by learning from and through the words of Jesus.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you continue to draw near to people today as you did Sarah and Abraham in the heat of the day and Mary and Martha in the midst of their daily round. Move us by the power of your Spirit to those places where we can develop most as followers of your Son. Inspire us to attend to fresh learning and insights into your nature in the company of others. Transform us to be prepared to share our faith with others – both within St Peter's and beyond. These prayers we offer through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.