

ONE OF THE most powerful lessons in hospitality furnished by the Scriptures must be the scene of Abraham and the angels in Genesis 18. There is Abraham, sitting in the tent door, when along come three men. But they don't catch him snoozing; he spots them before they even get close. He "lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo . . .". He is looking out, ready to identify a need, keen to spot an opportunity.

Having done so, does he quickly withdraw inside the tent, swiftly but silently closing the door, not wanting to be inconvenienced at this time of rest? In any case, why should he take a risk with people he doesn't really know? Not a bit of it! Nor does he look down or otherwise avert his eyes, mumble 'Nice day!', or even tell them where the nearest inn may be found. Instead, he jumps to his feet and runs to meet them. There is a delightful spontaneity about this as he instinctively charges off. The passing years have not diluted his enthusiasm or rendered him indifferent. He is a man on a mission.

The running continues, and it is contagious. Note these references in the space of eight verses:

"when he saw them, he *ran* to meet them";

"And Abraham *hastened* into the tent unto Sarah . . .";

". . . and said, Make ready *quickly*";

"And Abraham *ran* unto the herd";

"and he [a young man?] *hasted* to dress it".

Imagine the bustling activity which took place. Cooking for guests is stressful enough when you know they're coming a week before! But Abraham is not daunted. He engages top speed to offer the best and promptest service he possibly can. His haste spreads to his servant, who now also runs. Abraham's undertaking naturally becomes his, and the household works as one (with both Sarah and the servant on board) to carry out the course of action Abraham has instigated. There is no hint here of 'You invited them, you get on with it!', despite the unexpected nature of the arrival. It is always easy to excuse oneself with, 'I'm busy with something else right now', but there is none of that here.

Had they not been angels, they might have been rather taken aback by Abraham's eagerness in running towards them; was he coming to challenge them as trespassers? But instead he bows before them to the earth, showing proper respect and deference. He then invites them to wash their

feet, take some rest (sacrificially trading his own shady ease for theirs), and "comfort [their] hearts" by enjoying "a morsel of bread". This understatement may be passed off as a polite way of speaking, but it carries with it a nice thought. He offers a morsel of bread but returns with something more akin to a feast. He under-promises and over-delivers. And so he proceeds to the first foot-washing of the Scriptures. Perhaps Jesus' own actions in John 13 take further at one level a pattern of service which Abraham had begun.

At the end of his speech to them, Abraham adds a curious and interesting little expression. He concludes, "I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: *for therefore are ye come to your servant*" (18:5) What does he mean by that last phrase? It seems to reflect Abraham's sense of what is appropriate and 'right' in the sense, perhaps, of spiritually ordained and co-ordinated. It is no accident, he thinks, that these men have just showed up, nor that he just happened to be sitting there able to offer hospitality at that time. There is a time and a place—and since *this* is that time and place, the moment is to be seized. Does the phrase imply, moreover, that there is no point in Abraham having been there if he is not enabled or willing to help, or if they cannot avail themselves of what he can offer? If this is along the right lines, it shows a deep awareness of providence, and reveals a perceptive spiritual outlook on Abraham's part.

Although he makes use of his servants, Abraham gets personally involved in the food preparations. He does not stand aloof, despite the servants he has at his disposal to cook and serve. He wants to be involved in the act of service, not merely to command it from on high. And when the food is finally ready, Abraham is there to serve it and to enjoy the company of his guests. This is the moment all that effort had been building up to (and the irony is, he doesn't even know the greatness of his guests!). Now all the running and the bustling is halted and Abraham *stands* in respect for his guests while they enjoy what has been prepared. "He stood by them under the tree" like the waiter, yes; yet that phrase of 'standing by' is also used of angels elsewhere in the Scriptures. Abraham's behaviour is itself worthy of an angel, the very guests he hosts!

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